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**Determinants of Taiwanese Attitude toward Independence, 2008-2024**

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*“We are a sovereign and independent country; our name is the Republic of China, and there is no need to declare Taiwan independence separately.”*

[Official statement by Lai Ching-te before the Legislative Yuan, September 26, 2017]

**Introduction**

On September 26, 2017, then–Premier Lai Ching-te (now President of Taiwan) reaffirmed a position that remains deeply contentious in Taiwan’s political discourse to this day: “Taiwan is a sovereign and independent country; its name is the Republic of China, and the two sides (of the Strait) are not subordinate to each other” (Ye, 2017)[[1]](#footnote-1). Responding to a Kuomintang legislator’s questions about constitutional amendments on territorial matters, Lai further clarified: “I am a political practitioner who advocates Taiwan independence. I am also a pragmatic pro-independence advocate. Pragmatism means recognizing that we are already a sovereign and independent country—called the Republic of China—and there is no need to declare Taiwan independence separately.” While framed within the existing constitutional status quo, Lai’s remarks marked the first time a sitting Premier had openly identified as a pro-independence figure. This moment encapsulated the core dilemma in Taiwan’s political future and raised enduring questions about the conditions under which Taiwanese public opinion shifts toward independence, unification, or strategic ambiguity.

What are Taiwanese independence and unification, and what does the “status quo” mean in cross-strait relations? What factors determine whether a Taiwanese individual is pro-independence, pro-unification, or pro–status quo? While these questions may be familiar to practitioners of Chinese and Taiwanese politics, citizens of Taiwan and China, and scholars of great power competition and international relations, they often remain ambiguous to audiences outside this specific academic and geographical context. Understanding these questions has profound academic and policy significance. Academically, this study adds additional empirical

This paper investigates the complex and conditional nature of Taiwanese attitudes toward independence. While previous research has identified multiple determinants shaping Taiwanese preferences—including national identity, economic considerations, generational differences, and security concerns—these factors have typically been studied in isolation, leaving their relative importance and complex interactions underexplored. As Chu (2004)[[2]](#footnote-2) and Niou (2004)[[3]](#footnote-3) argue, Taiwanese attitudes toward independence and unification are not static, ideologically-based positions but rather conditional preferences that shift in response to changing circumstances. Public preferences in Taiwan are heavily contingent on the perceived costs and benefits of different outcomes[[4]](#footnote-4), particularly regarding China's potential military response and the economic implications of altered cross-strait relations. This conditional nature of preferences creates methodological challenges for researchers attempting to measure public opinion accurately, as standard survey questions that force respondents to choose between independence, unification, or the status quo fail to capture the strategic and conditional character of these preferences[[5]](#footnote-5).

Thus, my research utilizes Chu (2004) and Niou (2004)’s innovative “conditional preference” framework that uses paired conditional questions to directly examine the impact of various factors on public opinion toward Taiwan’s independence and reunification. I argue that Taiwanese preferences toward independence are shaped by a complex interplay between national identity, perceived military threat from China, expectations about economic benefits from cross-strait relations, and generational differences – with no single factor alone sufficient to explain the patterns in public opinion.

This thesis proceeds in four parts. First, I provide historical and conceptual clarification of what “independence,” “unification,” and “status quo” mean in Taiwan’s political context, including party positions and popular narratives. Second, I review existing scholarship on the general determinants of public attitudes toward foreign policy, as well as studies specifically focused on Taiwanese public opinion. I then introduce the key theoretical frameworks that inform this thesis, including Hurwitz and Peffley’s (1987) hierarchical belief system model and primarily the conditional preference frameworks developed by Chu (2004) and subsequently Niou (2004). Third, I present my original empirical analysis from the TNSS dataset across multiple years to assess and present the weight of different variables in shaping individuals’ preferences toward Taiwanese independence under different conditions. Finally, I discuss the broader implications of these findings for regional politics and Taiwan’s strategic future; and suggest pathways for future research into the conditionality of public preferences.

This paper makes two main contributions to our understanding of Taiwanese public opinion on independence and unification. First, it systematically evaluates the relative impact of multiple factors on shaping these attitudes, and evaluates which determinants exert the greatest influence across important years in cross-strait relations. Second, it advances a theoretical framework that conceptualizes Taiwanese preferences as conditional and strategic, influenced by a combination of identity, security, and economic considerations rather than by any single factor in isolation.

Understanding the complex determinants of Taiwanese public opinion carries significant implications for cross-strait relations, regional security, and international relations. As Taiwan navigates its complex relationship with an increasingly assertive China, policymakers on both sides of the Taiwan Strait—as well as in Washington, Tokyo, and other capitals in the Indo-Pacific - would benefit from a more rigorous understanding of what shapes Taiwanese attitudes toward their island's future status and how these attitudes might evolve in response to changing circumstances. In summary, this paper is not simply about whether Taiwanese people support independence. It is about when, why, and under what conditions that support emerges—how it is shaped, how it fluctuates, and what it means for the evolving political identity of Taiwan.

**Brief History of Cross-Strait Relations**

To understand what “independence”, “unification”, and “status quo” means in the Taiwanese context, it would be necessary to walk through a brief history between China and Taiwan to ensure these concepts are well addressed and understood in a consistent manner for the rest of this study.

The earliest historical record regarding China’s relation with Taiwan can be dated back to 230 CE, but it remains controversial if the land Chinese explorers recorded is modern day Taiwan or Okinawa (Ye, 1982)[[6]](#footnote-6). In 1281, the Yuan dynasty established a naval base and local administrative structure in Penghu, marking the first instance of formal political and military presence by a Chinese central government in the Taiwan region. However, this initiative represented a strategic foothold focused on maritime defense and regional security, rather than comprehensive control over the entirety of Taiwan’s main island. When the Dutch East India Company (VOC) occupied Taiwan in 1604, it focused on attracting Hoklo and Hakka immigrants from Chinese mainland to assist with excavation and colonization (Willis 2015)[[7]](#footnote-7). The island then served as a safe harbor for the exile Southern Ming dynasty, and fell into the control of Qing dynasty in 1683.

While the Qing dynasty maintained a harsh ban on cross-strait immigration for almost 200 years gaining control of Taiwan, it was forced to make this strategic move that could establish a sufficient population basis for the island after rounds of foreign aggression and colonial attempts. However, it eventually lost control of Taiwan in the first Sino-Japanese war in 1895, until the winning of WWII in 1945 when it was returned to the Republic of China, ruled by Kuomintang (KMT). The return of Taiwan, also called “Guang-fu 光复”, represents the first example of “unification” in Taiwanese context—after years of colonial rule, the two sides of the strait has once again become unified.

Then, what is the concept of independence? Was Taiwanese de facto independence achieved through a public voting, as seen in the independence movement for Quebec and Scotland and Kosovo? The Taiwanese case is different: after failed attempts to establish a unified government as soon as defeating the Japanese due to severe ideological difference and political distrust[[8]](#footnote-8), the Communist Party of China (CCP) and KMT began a civil war. CCP eventually defeated the KMT for many reasons, and the KMT fled to Taiwan in 1949. Given both U.S. strategic interest and naval inferiority of the CCP, attempts to invade Taiwan has failed, and Taiwan, de jure Republic of China, achieved de facto independence with U.S. security commitment and partial international recognition. While the Republic of China remained to be an internationally recognized political entity, with all sufficient governmental institutions, it has been encountering a concurrent, internal independence movement led primarily by Hoklo Taiwanese who are dissatisfied with the KMT’s high pressure authoritarian politics, discriminatory resource allocation, and cultural assimilation (Chu and Lin, 20010, 103)[[9]](#footnote-9). Starting as a united opposition to KMT’s authoritarian rule, these forces gradually transformed into the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) of Taiwan. In general, the KMT prefers unification with mainland China, but not in the near future; and the DPP generally proposes that Taiwan should become a constitutionally independent country with the name as “Taiwan”.

**Party, Unification, and Independence in the Taiwanese Context**

Regardless of the stated long-term missions in their party constitutions, both the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) currently endorse maintaining the status quo as means to ease tensions with China. Both are also broad-based political parties—so-called “big tents”—that include politicians with divergent perspectives on Taiwan’s future. Within the KMT, three general camps can be identified: “Red Unifiers,” who advocate for a PRC-led unification that would either designate Taiwan as a special administrative region similar to Hong Kong or implement the mainland’s political system; “Blue Unifiers,” who support a ROC-led unification focused on preserving Taiwan’s democratic system while promoting democratic reforms in mainland China; and finally, proponents of “Huadu”—a view that supports de facto independence under the continued use of the ROC name, which will be discussed in the following paragraph. The DPP, known for its internal factions, can be broadly divided into two camps as well: aggressive independence supporters, represented by President Lai Ching-te, and status quo endorsers with a long-term goal of eventual Taiwanese independence, sharing some similarity with the “Huadu” group, exemplified by former President Tsai Ing-wen.

Thus, there are two mainstream approaches to the question of Taiwan’s independence within its political discourse. The first group regards the Republic of China as an already independent and sovereign political entity. Within this view, two sub-branches exist: one sees the ROC and PRC as forming a kind of confederation—each side having its own interpretation of “One China” while claiming full territorial sovereignty but remaining governed separately. This is commonly referred to as “One China, respective interpretations” (一中各表). The other sub-branch, “Huadu”, holds that the Republic of China is synonymous with Taiwan, and that the “China” in its name is merely a historical or literary term, not a political indication of unification, similar to the quote I have at the introduction; although President Lai is a member of the second group, which advocates for a more assertive approach: abolishing the outdated Republic of China framework entirely and initiating a formal constitutional process to establish a new, fully independent nation explicitly named “Taiwan,” rather than treating the term as a mere geographic designation.

And finally, the “status quo” refers to the continuation of Taiwan’s ambiguous international position under a framework of partial recognition. It implies the maintenance of the One China principle in diplomatic communications, mutual acknowledgment of each side’s de facto existence, the absence of military aggression from China, and a corresponding restraint from Taiwan in not pursuing formal constitutional independence with full international rights and recognition.

The above paragraph entails an important fact: while KMT is typically perceived to be a pro-China and pro-Unification party, voting for the KMT does not guarantee a support for unification, its voters may align with any of the three groups based on differing ideological positions, economic opinion, and military threat perception; similarly, voting for the DPP does not represent an outright support for independence and may be influenced by non-ideological determinants as well. Party identification should not be equalized to definite ideological positions that entirely determine individual attitude toward the future of Taiwan’s status. Similarly, other preferences and psychological identities, including but not limited to national identity, ethnic group differences, education level, generational cohort, economic and threat perceptions, should neither deterministically shape individual preference toward independence, unification, and status quo. No single factor can account for the complex decision-making in a individual’s reported attitude toward independence, they are shaped by multiple factors, and by different conditions, as I will explain in later sections of this study.

The following section reviews the general theoretical foundation for understanding the determinants of public attitudes toward foreign policy and summarizes existing scholarship on the specific factors shaping Taiwanese public opinion. I identify the conditional preference frameworks developed by Chu (2004), Niou (2004), and more recently Wang et al. (2025) as the most suitable analytical approach for examining the complex and contingent nature of Taiwanese public opinion on independence, unification, and the status quo.

**Theoretical Background**

**General Determinant of Political Attitude toward Foreign Policy**

Research on the general determinants of public attitude toward foreign policy has developed considerably. Early perspectives, such as Almond (1950)[[10]](#footnote-10) and Kennan (1951)[[11]](#footnote-11), suggested that the public, moody and uniformed, have unstructured opinions on foreign affairs. The Vietnam War era prompted a re-examination of this idea, leading to a new consensus that while the public might not be perfectly informed, their general policy opinions are stable and responsive to events[[12]](#footnote-12). Hurwitz and Peffley (1987) found that general core values structure attitudes hierarchically. Recent research that builds on Hurwitz and Peffley’s core value theory, for example Jacoby (2014)[[13]](#footnote-13), Kertzer, Powers, Rathbun, and Iyer (2014)[[14]](#footnote-14), and Rathbun, Kertzer, Reifler, Goren, and Scotto (2016)[[15]](#footnote-15), continues to emphasize the role of core values in shaping foreign policy views, such as party identification and ideology.

Recently, research explores foreign policy attitudes in two main directions, through top-down and bottom-up models. Top-down models highlight the role of external factors, such as political elites and the mass media (Kertzer 2023, 6)[[16]](#footnote-16). The influence of elite is supported by Powlick and Katz (1998)[[17]](#footnote-17). The public often takes cues from party leaders, as noted by Berinsky (2009)[[18]](#footnote-18). Work by McCombs and Shaw (1972)[[19]](#footnote-19), Iyengar and Kinder (2010)[[20]](#footnote-20), and Entman (2004)[[21]](#footnote-21) have examined the media's role in agenda-setting, priming, and framing for how the public perceives policy and form policy attitudes. Bottom-up models emphasize the role of individual traits in formulating policy attitudes. Such individual traits may include ideological orientations, such as the two-dimensional structure of militant and cooperative internationalism developed by Wittkopf (1990)[[22]](#footnote-22); and psychological constructs—such as core values, moral foundations, personal belief systems, and broader worldviews have been shown to significantly predict individual foreign policy preferences[[23]](#footnote-23). Beyond psychological and informational factors, demographic and contextual factors have also been found to associate with public attitude toward foreign policy. Such as gender differences[[24]](#footnote-24), party identification[[25]](#footnote-25), and issue salience[[26]](#footnote-26). Albeit their significant contributions, most of these studies have focused on the American context, drawing predominantly on U.S. data and populations. This geographic concentration might limit the generalizability of their findings to Taiwan—where distinct historical, cultural, and geopolitical conditions may shape foreign policy attitudes through different mechanisms. Nevertheless, the broad conceptual determinants identified in this body of work—such as gender, issue salience, and party identification—offer valuable analytical touchpoints. These factors have been echoed in studies of Taiwanese public opinion, suggesting that while context matters, some underlying dynamics may transcend national boundaries. In the following section, I address how these general, psychological, and contextual factors have been incorporated into research specifically focused on Taiwan.

Before jumping into the specific work on Taiwan, I do want to elaborate on the hierarchical belief system model in Hurwitz and Peffley (1987), as it presents a complete and thorough logistic map for understanding how ideology-based beliefs structure public attitudes toward foreign policy. Hurwitz and Peffley proposes that public opinion on foreign policy is constructed through a hierarchical belief system where specific policy preferences are derived from more abstract beliefs called postures, which are constrained by fundamental core values about the international community[[27]](#footnote-27). They suggest a "top-down" three-level processing where individuals use their general knowledge and abstract beliefs to interpret and respond to specific foreign policy issues. Faced with the complexity and ambiguity of international affairs, citizens often act as "cognitive misers," relying on these broader beliefs as cognitive shortcuts to make sense of the world[[28]](#footnote-28). The study found that core values, such as ethnocentrism and beliefs about the morality of warfare, influence the adoption of general postures, which in turn shape opinions on specific policies. This hierarchical structure provides a framework for understanding how individuals form consistent foreign policy attitudes, even with limited detailed knowledge of international affairs.

Specifically, At the uppermost level of this hierarchy reside core values, which are the most fundamental and abstract beliefs an individual holds about the international community[[29]](#footnote-29). These values, such as ethnocentrism (the belief in one's country's superiority) and moral beliefs about killing in warfare, are personal and do not directly address governmental policies. The source argues that these "easy" values, which don't require deep knowledge of foreign affairs, influence the development of general postures. For instance, a strong sense of ethnocentrism might lead to the adoption of a militaristic or anticommunist posture[[30]](#footnote-30). Similarly, moral objections to war could foster an isolationist stance[[31]](#footnote-31). The study found empirical links, showing that those rejecting the immorality of killing in war are more likely to favor a militant stance, and ethnocentrism underlies both isolationist and anti-Communist orientations[[32]](#footnote-32). The first layer provides theoretical guidance for me to identify the appropriate question and responses in my study dataset.

The middle level of the hierarchy consists of general postures, which are broad, abstract beliefs about the appropriate overall governmental strategies in foreign affairs. The study identifies three key postures: militarism (preference for an assertive foreign policy through military strength), anticommunism (opposition to Communist-bloc nations), and isolationism (desire to avoid international entanglements). Importantly, these general postures then serve as guides for individuals when forming opinions on specific foreign policy issues.

Finally, at the most concrete, bottom level are specific policy preferences, such as opinions on defense spending, nuclear arms policy, military involvement, policy toward the Soviet Union, and international trade. These preferences are derived from and constrained by the general postures at the middle tier. For example, individuals with an isolationist posture are more likely to oppose military interventions and favor trade barriers, while those with a militaristic posture tend to support increased defense spending and oppose nuclear arms control[[33]](#footnote-33). The study's findings, using a LISREL model, generally support this hierarchical structure, showing significant connections between the three levels of hierarchical belief system and indicating that more abstract beliefs explain the variation in more specific attitudes[[34]](#footnote-34). This framework suggests that public opinion on foreign policy is not random but is meaningfully structured through a system where core values shape general orientations, which in turn influence specific policy preferences.

In sum, Hurwitz and Peffley (1987) offer a valuable conceptual framework for understanding how the general public forms foreign policy attitudes—progressing from core values, to general postures, and finally to specific policy preferences. However, it is crucial to recognize that each stage of this hierarchical process is influenced by a complex interplay of demographic, informational, contextual, and psychological factors. These determinants shape abstract beliefs under varying conditions, a dynamic not fully captured in the original model. This gap highlights the need for further empirical investigation into how these influences operate at each level of the hierarchy. While this study does not aim to revise the structure of foreign policy opinion formation in a global context, it builds on this foundational work, as well as the factors identified in newer studies, to examine how one specific foreign policy issue—Taiwan’s cross-strait status—is shaped by these underlying factors in the Taiwanese context.

The next subsection reviews works specifically written to approach determinants of public attitude toward foreign policy in the Taiwanese context, and recommends the conditional preference network developed by Chu (2004), Niou (2004), and Wang et al. (2025) as the optimal framework for fully accounting the dynamic of cross-strait relations attitude in Taiwan.

**Specific Determinants of Taiwanese Political Attitudes toward the Cross-Strait Relations**

Past studies have collectively identified multiple factors shaping Taiwanese public opinion on independence, the status quo, and reunification. Notably Chinese military threat, national identity as Taiwanese or Chinese or both, economic intercedence, party identification, and generational differences. Chu's (2004) analysis of longitudinal survey data reveals that while efforts by Taiwanese leaders to promote a pro-independence sentiment have had some effect, the perception of China's *growing economic potential* and the *increasing inevitability of cross-strait economic integration* have somewhat constrained the popular support for Taiwan independence, particularly among the younger generation[[35]](#footnote-35). Tang’s (2007) analysis of survey data reveals that education, socioeconomic status, and economic considerations influence citizen’s cross-strait attitudes[[36]](#footnote-36). Sobel et al. (2010)[[37]](#footnote-37) also note that cross-strait tensions and specific events like China's missile tests and leaders' speeches have influenced the Taiwanese public to become more independence-minded. Furthermore, Wang (2017)[[38]](#footnote-38) also identifies the feeling of hostility from Beijing, particularly regarding diplomatic isolation, has also been a significant factor in hardening Taiwanese identity and a preference for independence. Lastly, Wang et al. (2025)[[39]](#footnote-39) concludes that while Taiwanese nationalism has risen significantly, the majority still prefer the status quo due to a combination of concerns about China's potential military threat and the economic reliance on China.

**Methodological Limitations in Previous Research**

While these studies provide valuable insights and different perspectives into the determinants of Taiwanese public opinion on cross-strait relations, they often examine these factors in isolation, leaving their interactions and collective influence underexplored. A common issue that challenges accurate measurement of Taiwanese attitudes toward independence is "preference ambiguity."[[40]](#footnote-40) Typical questionnaires only ask respondents to choose one option among reunification, independence, or maintaining the status quo. When asked to indicate a clear preference, survey respondents tend to hide their conditional preferences by selecting the "status quo" answer. This pattern is consistent with established findings in survey design research, which shows that offering a middle position significantly increases the proportion of respondents selecting that category (Moors, 2008)[[41]](#footnote-41). Furthermore, Presser and Schuman (1980) argue that respondents with less intense opinions are more affected by the presence or absence of a middle response category than those who feel strongly about the issue[[42]](#footnote-42). This observation also aligns with the consistent finding that most Taiwanese express a preference for the less intense option of maintaining the status quo[[43]](#footnote-43). Many Taiwanese respondents selecting the status quo option in surveys not because they genuinely prefer it, but because this middle position allows them to hide their calculated conditional preferences[[44]](#footnote-44). To overcome this limitation, researchers who study Taiwanese public opinion need more sophisticated approaches to capture the conditional nature of Taiwanese attitudes.

Recognizing this limitation, Chu (2004)[[45]](#footnote-45) introduces a conditional preference framework to improve the measurement of Taiwanese attitudes. Instead of forcing respondents into static categories, Chu designs a paired-question methodology that asks respondents to express their views on two carefully crafted hypothetical questions:

1. *Taiwan should become a new state if it can maintain peace with mainland China after declaring independence.*
2. *The two sides should unite if mainland's social, economic, and political conditions become comparable to Taiwan.*

A table with text on it

AI-generated content may be incorrect.For each question, respondents could select "agree," "no opinion," or "disagree." By cross tabulating these responses, Chu created a response matrix with nine distinct orientations toward Taiwan's future (in Table 1). This methodology represents a significant advancement beyond conventional surveys that forced respondents to choose between independence, unification, or maintaining the status quo without capturing the conditional nature of these preferences.

Table 1. Nine Orientations toward Unification toward Independence (Chu 2004)[[46]](#footnote-46)

Niou (2004) coincides with Chu (2004) in examining Taiwanese public opinion through a conditional preference framework; however, their fundamental differences lie in the weight they assign to national identity versus strategic calculations in shaping cross-strait attitudes. Chu (2004) argues that national identity is the primary driver of cross-strait attitudes. While he acknowledges that external factors—such as security concerns and economic conditions—can influence the intensity of preferences, but do not fundamentally alter an individual’s underlying identity-based stance. In his model, those who strongly identify as Taiwanese are inherently more likely to support independence, while those with dual identities or stronger connections to Chinese heritage are more open to unification.

However, because many respondents prefer not to make a direct or risky political choice, identity-driven preferences often appear as support for the status quo. Chu’s paired-question methodology was designed to uncover latent identity-driven attitudes by presenting respondents with conditional scenarios—revealing whether their “status quo” preference leans toward independence or unification given the right conditions.

Niou (2004), by contrast, challenges the notion that identity alone determines cross-strait preferences. He argues that Taiwanese public opinion is highly strategic, with attitudes toward independence or unification shaped by both internal and external factors, including[[47]](#footnote-47) national identity (internal factor), China’s military threat (external factor), U.S. security commitments (external factor), Taiwan’s economic performance (internal factor), and China’s economic and political development (external factor).

Rather than treating identity as the dominant force, Niou places it on equal footing with other key factors, arguing that individuals engage in cost-benefit analyses when deciding their stance on Taiwan’s future. His hypothetical scenario approach tests how people shift their preferences in response to different strategic conditions— any Taiwanese hold conditional preferences, with a significant portion willing to shift toward either independence or unification depending on external circumstances. His work demonstrates that Taiwanese preference for the status quo is often a strategic calculation against uncertainty, rather than determined by inherent ideological commitment as suggested by Chu (2004). This perspective challenges traditional survey methodologies that assume preferences remain stable across different contexts. Niou's work suggests how internal and external factors continuously reshape individual decision-making processes even at the grassroots level, suggesting that public opinion on cross-strait relations is better understood as a series of conditional responses to evolving scenarios rather than as determined by fixed political identities.

More recently, Wang et al. (2025) expanded on the frameworks of Chu and Niou utilizing public opinion data from 2002 to 2022, measuring if conditional preferences for independence and reunification still holds for Taiwanese public opinion under two specific conditions[[48]](#footnote-48):

1. *Whether China would declare war following a declaration of independence.*

2. *Whether Taiwan and China are politically, economically, and socially compatible.*

Their findings reinforce earlier research and find that support for independence increases significantly if China does not threaten military action, while support for unification declines when China is perceived as politically/socially/economically incompatible with Taiwan. However, while Wang et al.'s study validates the conditional preferences model, it suffers from key limitations that restrict the depth and explanatory power of its findings.

First, Wang et al. (2025) examine only two conditional variables—military threat and government/social/economic compatibility—when existing literature suggests that Taiwanese preferences are shaped by a broader set of factors, including national identity, U.S. security commitments, Taiwan’s economic performance, generational differences, and party identification. By limiting their scope to just two conditions, their study oversimplifies the complexity of cross-strait attitudes, leaving crucial determinants unexamined.

Second, their approach is primarily descriptive, relying on cross-tabulations rather than advanced statistical methods that could systematically analyze the weight of each factor in shaping public opinion. While their findings effectively identify trends, they do not test the relative weight of different variables. For example, how does national identity compare to economic concerns or military threats in shaping preferences? This is not unique to Wang et al. (2025), but also lacked in other studies studying the same question. A more robust analysis would involve a multinomial logit regression as seen in Niou (2004)[[49]](#footnote-49) that measures the independent effect on cross-strait preferences.

By summarizing the contributions and limitations of Chu (2004), Niou (2004), and Wang et al. (2025), this study takes a step further by applying Niou’s conditional preference framework to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the determinants of Taiwanese public attitudes. This analysis focuses on six key years—2008, 2014, 2016, 2020, 2022, and 2024—each selected for its political significance in shaping cross-strait relations or in response to major political events.

The year 2008 marks the beginning of Kuomintang (KMT) President Ma Ying-jeou’s first term. A mainlander (Waishengren) by heritage, Ma is often considered Taiwan’s last pro-Beijing and pro-unification president. Even after retirement, he has continued to play a bridging role in cross-strait dialogue. However, his perceived indifference toward pro-independence educational reforms and bipartisan moderation has been criticized as contributing to the rise of a “Taiwanese-only” identity among younger generations.

The year 2014 was chosen to capture the political and social impact of the Cross-Strait Service and Trade Agreement (commonly abbreviated as “Fumao 服贸”), which proposed EU-style economic integration with China. The agreement triggered intense public backlash and ultimately led to the Sunflower Movement—a student-led protest that generated lasting political and cultural repercussions in Taiwan.

In 2016, the election of President Tsai Ing-wen and the concurrent election of U.S. President Donald Trump marked a significant moment of transition. Tsai’s administration brought support for independence-oriented policies and declining cross-strait economic interactions, while Trump’s unpredictability raised concerns about the consistency of U.S. security commitments to Taiwan.

The year 2020 offers a unique analytical checkpoint, capturing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on public perceptions of cross-strait relations, governance, and global alignment. In 2022, U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s high-profile visit to Taiwan became a flashpoint for escalating tensions, prompting a wave of public discourse around sovereignty and security. Finally, 2024 represents the most recent data point in this study, offering insights into current trends in Taiwanese public opinion and their possible trajectories moving forward.

**Methodology**

*\* The final draft will include complete crosstabulations and multinominal regression table for all strategic years (2008, 2014, 2016, 2020, 2022, and 2024) to reflect how these data and results are interacting with both general trend pro-independence attitudes and pro-Taiwanese only national identity, as well as serving as process tracking strategic events in the selected years to see how these events are affecting fluctuations in general attitudes and national identity. The following paragraph displays what my methodology using the results from Taiwan National Security Study’s 2024 data, and I will replicate the same recoding, analytical technique, and presentation for rest of the years.*

This study builds on Niou's (2004) conditional preference framework to examine how Taiwanese attitudes toward independence have evolved over time and uses survey data from the Taiwan National Security Studies (TNSS) conducted in 2024 to capture the newest trends in Taiwanese public opinion following Wang et al. (2025)’s examination of 2002-2022 public opinion data.

**Data Sources**

The dataset for this study is the Taiwan National Security Studies (TNSS), a nationally representative survey that tracks public attitudes toward Taiwan’s security, cross-strait relations, and U.S. foreign policy commitments. The weighed dataset includes responses on preferences for independence, unification, and the status quo, as well as key independent variables that influence these preferences.

**Variables**

This study examines attitudes toward independence as the dependent variable, measured through survey responses indicating support for independence, unification, or maintaining the status quo under various conditions.

*Independent variables include:*

1. National identity *(Taiwanese, Chinese, or both)* – Captures whether identity influences preferences for independence or unification.

2. Age/generational cohorts – Tests whether younger or older generations differ in their cross-strait attitudes.

3. Perceived military threat from China – Measures whether fear of conflict affects support for independence.

4. Mainland Economic integration attitudes – Assesses whether belief in closer economic integration with mainland China influences attitudes.

5. Party Identification *(DPP, KMT, third parties, or non-partisan)* – Determines whether partisan alignment conditions policy preferences.

6. U.S. security commitment – Examines whether belief in U.S. military support affects willingness to support independence.

7. Ethnic Group – Whether ethnic group affiliation (Waisheng, Hakka, Minnan, Aboriginals) display differences.

8. Education Level – Whether educate level associates with attitudes. If so, how much does it attribute to differences?

**Analytical Approach**

This study replicates Niou’s (2004) statistical approach but applies it to more recent data (2024) to assess how Taiwanese public opinion has changed over time. Using crosstabulation and multinomial logit regression, this study evaluates how each independent variable affects the probability of supporting independence, unification, or the status quo in 2024.

*Crosstabulation*

I first present a crosstabulation analysis to examine the relationship between preferences for independence and unification in 2024, providing a preliminary understanding of how Taiwanese respondents navigate these two competing political orientations. By categorizing respondents into unconditional supporters, conditional supporters, and non-supporters for both independence and unification, the crosstab allows for a direct comparison of how these preferences intersect. The results of this analysis serve as a baseline for the multinomial logit regression model, which further tests how various independent variables—such as national identity, economic expectations, and security concerns—shape these preferences over time.

|  | Taiwanese | Both | Chinese | Row Total (N) |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Unconditional Support (IND) | 85.5 (396) | 14.0 (65) | 0.4 (2) | 463 |
| Conditional Support (IND) | 61.6 (305) | 37.8 (187) | 0.6 (3) | 495 |
| Non‐Support (IND) | 27.3 (77) | 65.6 (185) | 7.1 (20) | 282 |

A screenshot of a test

AI-generated content may be incorrect.Table 1. National Identity and Preferences on Taiwan Independence (% within each Independence Category)

Table 1 examines the relationship between national identity (self‐identification as Taiwanese, both Taiwanese and Chinese, or exclusively Chinese) and preferences on Taiwan independence. The results demonstrate a clear association between national identity and independence preferences. In terms of unconditional supporters, 85.5% identify as Taiwanese, while only 0.4% identify as Chinese. This distribution shifts among conditional supporters, where 61.6% are Taiwanese and 37.8% hold a dual identity. Among non‐supporters, however, the proportion of Taiwanese identity drops significantly (27.3%), with the largest percentage (65.6%) consists of those who identify as both Taiwanese and Chinese. Identification as solely Chinese remains low for all 3 groups. But the findings collectively suggest that a Taiwanese-identifying public is likely to support independence, and a more Chinese-identifying group is less likely to endorse it. The Pearson Chi‐Square test is statistically significant (p < .001), indicating that national identity plays a major role in shaping attitudes toward Taiwan’s independence.

|  | 20–29 | 30–39 | 40–49 | 50–59 | 60 and Above | Row Total (N) |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Unconditional Support | 17.2 (80) | 18.3 (85) | 21.7 (101) | 19.1 (89) | 23.7 (110) | 465 |
| Conditional Support | 21.1 (105) | 20.9 (104) | 21.1 (105) | 15.9 (79) | 21.1 (105) | 498 |
| Non‐Support | 5.3 (15) | 12.1 (34) | 17.8 (50) | 25.6 (72) | 39.1 (110) | 281 |

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AI-generated content may be incorrect.Table 2. Generational Differences and Preferences on Taiwan Independence (% within each Independence Category)

Table 2 presents the relationship between generational differences and support for Taiwan independence. Among unconditional supporters, the highest percentage (23.7%) is found for those 60 and above, while the lowest percentage (17.2%) is seen for those aged 20–29. Conversely, among non-supporters, the percentage increases steadily with age, reaching 39.1% for those 60 and above (an interesting contrast) , compared to only 5.3% among those in the youngest age group (20–29). The Pearson Chi-Square test is highly significant (p < .001), confirming that generational differences play a crucial role in shaping independence preferences. Younger respondents tend to be more supportive of independence, while older generations exhibit greater opposition.

|  | No Threat | Threat Perceived | Row Total (N) |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Unconditional Support | 58.4 (262) | 41.6 (187) | 449 |
| Conditional Support | 17.8 (86) | 82.2 (396) | 482 |
| Non‐Support | 10.0 (28) | 90.0 (251) | 279 |

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Table 3. Perceived China Threat and Preferences on Taiwan Independence (% within each Independence Category)

Table 3 examines the relationship between perceptions of a Chinese military threat and support for Taiwan independence. Among unconditional supporters, a majority (58.4%) believe there is no threat, while 41.6% believe there is a risk of Chinese military action. In contrast, for conditional supporters, the pattern is reversed—82.2% believe China would attack if Taiwan declared independence, while only 17.8% perceive no threat. Finally, in terms of non-supporters, the belief in a Chinese threat is overwhelming (90.0%), whereas only 10.0% see no threat. The Pearson Chi-Square test is also highly significant (p < .001), confirming that the perception of a Chinese threat strongly influences independence preferences. Those who believe China will attack are more likely to oppose independence or support it conditionally, while those who perceive no threat are more likely to support independence unconditionally.

|  | Strengthen | Decline | Row Total (N) |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Unconditional Support (IND) | 29.1 (118) | 70.9 (287) | 405 |
| Conditional Support (IND) | 62.2 (272) | 37.8 (165) | 437 |
| Non‐Support (IND) | 87.8 (209) | 12.2 (29) | 238 |

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AI-generated content may be incorrect.Table 4. Attitude toward Economic Integration with Mainland and Preferences on Taiwan Independence (% within each Independence Category)

Table 4 presents the relationship between attitude toward Mainland economic integration and preferences on Taiwan independence. Among unconditional supporters, 70.9% believe that Taiwan’s economic integration with the Mainland should decline, whereas 29.1% believe it should strengthen. Among non-supporters, the pattern reverses: 87.8% support stronger economic integration with the Mainland, while only 12.2% favor decline. Conditional supporters fall between these extremes, with 62.2% supporting stronger integration and 37.8% favoring economic decline. The Pearson Chi-Square test is highly significant (p < .001), confirming that economic perspectives on China are a crucial factor in shaping respondents’ attitudes toward Taiwan independence.

|  | KMT | DPP | TPP | Row Total (N) |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Unconditional Support (IND) | 10.7 (34) | 82.1 (262) | 7.2 (23) | 319 |
| Conditional Support (IND) | 36.8 (118) | 37.1 (119) | 26.2 (84) | 321 |
| Non‐Support (IND) | 76.7 (148) | 6.7 (13) | 16.6 (32) | 193 |

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AI-generated content may be incorrect.Table 5. Party Identification and Preferences on Taiwan Independence (% within each Independence Category)

Table 5 presents the relationship between party identification (KMT, DPP, and TPP) and support for Taiwan independence. Among unconditional supporters, 82.1% identify with the DPP, while only 10.7% belong to the KMT. The reverse pattern is seen among non‐supporters, where 76.7% are KMT members, while just 6.7% belong to the DPP. For conditional supporters, respondents display a relative equal distribution among three parties. I was expecting to see if TPP identifiers would be more associated with a "median-voter" image; but ultimately people who identify themselves as either KMT or DPP have exceeded that of TPP. The Pearson Chi‐Square test is highly significant (p < .001), confirming that party affiliation plays a critical role in A screenshot of a graph

AI-generated content may be incorrect.shaping attitudes toward Taiwan independence.

|  | U.S. Will Defend | Neutral | Row Total (N) |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Unconditional Support (IND) | 40.0 (340) | 27.8 (87) | 36.7 (427) |
| Conditional Support (IND) | 42.7 (363) | 36.1 (113) | 40.9 (476) |
| Non‐Support (IND) | 17.3 (147) | 36.1 (113) | 22.4 (260) |

Table 6. U.S Defense Commitment and Preferences on Taiwan Independence (% within each Independence Category)

Table 6 examines the relationship between perceived U.S. commitment to defending Taiwan and support for independence. The results indicate that expectations of U.S. defense influence respondents’ views on independence. Among unconditional supporters, 40.0% believe the U.S. will defend Taiwan, while 27.8% remain neutral. Conditional supporters, however, have the highest proportion believing in U.S. defense (42.7%), while 36.1% of neutral respondents fall into this category. Among non-supporters, the lowest percentage (17.3%) believe the U.S. will defend Taiwan, while 36.1% are neutral. The Pearson Chi-Square test is highly significant (p < .001), confirming that belief in U.S. defense commitments is associated with increased support for Taiwan independence. Those who expect U.S. military intervention are more likely to support independence, while those who are neutral are more evenly distributed between A screenshot of a test

AI-generated content may be incorrect.conditional support and non-support.

|  | Hakka | Minnan | Mainlanders | Aboriginals | Row Total (N) |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Unconditional Support (IND) | 9.6 (42) | 82.9 (364) | 4.6 (20) | 3.0 (13) | 439 |
| Conditional Support (IND) | 13.6 (66) | 76.4 (372) | 9.9 (48) | 0.2 (1) | 487 |
| Non‐Support (IND) | 14.8 (42) | 66.9 (190) | 16.9 (48) | 1.4 (4) | 284 |

Table 7. Ethnic Group and Preferences on Taiwan Independence (% within each Independence Category)

Table 7 presents the relationship between Taiwanese ethnic groups and support for Taiwan independence. Among unconditional supporters, the vast majority (82.9%) are Minnan (Hoklo), while only 4.6% are Mainlanders, 9.6% are Hakka, and 3.0% are Aboriginals. A similar trend is observed among conditional supporters, where 76.4% are Minnan and 9.9% are Mainlanders. Within non-supporters, the proportion of Mainlanders rises to 16.9%, while Minnan representation drops to 66.9%. The Pearson Chi-Square test is highly significant (p < .001), confirming that ethnic identity is a crucial factor influencing preferences for Taiwan independence. Minnan respondents are more likely to support independence, whereas Mainlanders are more likely to oppose it.

|  | Elementary and Below | Middle School | High School | Vocational School | College and Above | Row Total (N) |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Unconditional Support (IND) | 10.1 (47) | 15.1 (70) | 28.2 (131) | 8.8 (41) | 37.7 (175) | 464 |
| Conditional Support (IND) | 5.4 (27) | 7.4 (37) | 27.1 (136) | 13.8 (69) | 46.3 (232) | 501 |
| Non‐Support (IND) | 13.2 (38) | 10.4 (30) | 30.6 (88) | 13.9 (40) | 31.9 (92) | 288 |

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AI-generated content may be incorrect.Table 8. Education Level and Preferences on Taiwan Independence (% within each Independence Category)

Finally, table 8 visualizes the relationship between education level and support for Taiwan independence. The results suggest that higher education levels are associated with greater support for independence. Among unconditional supporters, 37.7% have attained college education or above, while only 10.1% have elementary education or below. The trend is similar for conditional supporters, with the highest proportion (46.3%) being college-educated, compared to 5.4% with elementary-level education. The non-supporters are more evenly distributed. 31.9% have a college education, and 13.2% have elementary-level education, suggesting that lower education levels correspond with greater opposition to independence. The Pearson Chi-Square test is highly significant (p < .001), confirming that education level is an important factor influencing attitudes toward Taiwan independence.

*Multinominal Regression*

Based on the multinomial logit regression results for preferences on independence (as shown regression table), several key findings emerge regarding the factors influencing Taiwanese public opinion.

| **Covariate** | **Conditional Supporters (B, SE)** | **Non-Supporters (B, SE)** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **National Identity (Ref = Both)** |  |  |
| Taiwanese | -0.699 (0.883) | -3.858^{\*\*\*} (0.732) |
| Chinese | 0.618 (0.891) | -1.177 (0.736) |
| **Generational Difference (Ref = 60+)** |  |  |
| 20-29 | 0.319 (0.201) | -1.655^{\*\*\*} (0.310) |
| 30-39 | 0.254 (0.200) | -0.918^{\*\*\*} (0.244) |
| 40-49 | 0.083 (0.195) | -0.705^{\*\*} (0.219) |
| 50-59 | -0.068 (0.206) | -0.205 (0.208) |
| **China Threat (Ref = Yes)** | -1.866^{\*\*\*} (0.153) | -2.531^{\*\*\*} (0.221) |
| **Economic Interdependence (Ref = Decline)** | 1.388^{\*\*\*} (0.147) | 2.858^{\*\*\*} (0.226) |
| **Party Identification (Refer = TPP)** |  |  |
| KMT | -0.055 (0.307) | 1.128^{\*\*\*} (0.334) |
| DPP | -2.095^{\*\*\*} (0.261) | -3.317^{\*\*\*} (0.391) |
| **U.S. Commitment (Refer = Neutral)** | -0.197 (0.161) | -1.100^{\*\*\*} (0.174) |
| **Ethnic Groups (Refer = Aboriginals)** |  |  |
| Hakka | 3.717^{\*\*} (1.430) | 1.156 (0.599) |
| Minnan | 3.278^{\*} (1.418) | 0.504 (0.565) |
| Mainlanders | 4.138^{\*\*} (1.441) | 2.030^{\*\*} (0.618) |
| **Education (Refer = College and Above)** |  |  |
| Elementary and Below | -0.836^{\*\*} (0.262) | 0.426 (0.254) |
| Middle School | -0.905^{\*\*\*} (0.226) | -0.185 (0.253) |
| High School | -0.249 (0.158) | 0.249 (0.189) |
| Vocational School | 0.236 (0.221) | 0.610^{\*} (0.258) |

\* Indicates p .05 two-tailed; entries are maximum likelihood coefficients with standard errors in

parentheses.

**Results and Discussion (Working)**

*\*Similarly, this includes discussion for 2024 only, the complete version will feature a comparison of say, which factor matters in 2008 but not in 2024. It is interesting to make such comparison that provides reflection for both Taiwan-concerned scholars and policymakers, and inspire policymakers to identify areas of improvement.*

The results of this multinomial logit model provide valuable insights into the factors shaping attitudes toward Taiwan independence and extend Niou’s (2004) and Wang et al’s (2025) analyses by incorporating more recent political, economic, and demographic trends.

Consistent with Niou’s findings, national identity remains a key determinant of independence preferences. Individuals who identify as Taiwanese are less likely to oppose independence compared to those who identify as both Taiwanese and Chinese, while those who identify solely as Chinese **do not exhibit a statistically significant difference** from the reference category.

Generational differences further reinforce the political divergence over independence, with younger respondents (particularly those aged 20–39) displaying a stronger inclination toward supporting independence, either conditionally or unconditionally. Older generations, who have had more direct experience with past KMT rule and potential cross-strait memories and family ties, are more likely to oppose independence or support it only under certain conditions. This generational shift indicates a key development beyond Chu’s (2004) findings: the younger cohorts in 2024, having grown up in a democratic Taiwan with less direct connection to China, are more inclined toward supporting sovereignty as compared to 20 years ago.

While multiple factors influence preferences for Taiwan independence, the results indicate that the perception of a military threat from China is the **strongest determinant of independence attitudes**. Individuals who do not perceive a military threat from China are more likely to support independence unconditionally, while those who do perceive a threat either become non-supporters or support conditionally. This aligns with Niou’s argument that security concerns constrain pro-independence sentiment, reinforcing the idea that external deterrence remains a critical factor in Taiwan’s political landscape.

In contrast, economic integration with China emerges as the strongest pro-status quo force that discourages unconditional support for independence. Individuals who favor strengthening Taiwan’s economic ties with China have a higher tendency to oppose independence. Economic interdependence with China remains a critical factor in shaping Taiwan’s political trajectory, reinforcing arguments that Taiwanese voters may prioritize economic stability over nationalist aspirations.

The impact of party identification function quite as expected, DPP supporters are overwhelmingly more likely to support independence unconditionally, while KMT supporters are significantly more likely to oppose it.

The influence of U.S. defense commitments, however, presents a more complicated effect than Niou originally examined in 2004. While belief in U.S. military support does not significantly differentiate conditional and unconditional supporters, it has a strong impact in reducing outright opposition to independence. This result provides an interesting finding that confidence in U.S. defense assistance primarily acts as a deterrent to pro-China alignment, rather than a direct motivator for pro-independence sentiment.

Ethnic background, an area underexplored in Western academia focuses, continues to shape attitudes toward independence. Waisheng (Mainland-ancestry) Taiwanese remain the most likely to oppose independence, consistent with historical patterns, while Hakka and Minnan individuals tend to support independence conditionally rather than unconditionally. This suggests that while ethnic identity remains a key determinant, the stark ethnic cleavages that characterized earlier decades may be evolving, with greater internal variation within groups.

Finally, education level plays a pivotal role in structuring independence attitudes, though its effect is less evident than the security and economic variables. Higher education correlates with greater unconditional support for independence, while lower education levels are associated with more conditional or uncertain positions. Notably, vocational school graduates are significantly more likely to oppose independence than college graduates, suggesting that socioeconomic background—rather than education alone—may be influencing political attitudes. This adds an important socioeconomic dimension to Niou’s framework, indicating that the intersection of education, class, and political ideology is worth further exploration.

**Conclusion (Working)**

Overall, these findings largely support Niou’s original arguments while refining and expanding upon them in key areas. The persistence of national identity, generational shifts, security concerns, economic considerations, and party politics as primary drivers of independence attitudes reaffirm Niou’s framework. However, the results in 2024 also introduce important refinements, particularly in identifying China’s military threat as the strongest determinant impacting Taiwanese conditional preference toward independence, and economic integration as the most powerful predictor of opposition to sovereignty. These findings indicate that while the fundamental forces shaping Taiwan’s sovereignty debate remain largely intact, their manifestations are evolving in response to broader political, economic, and generational shifts.

**Discussion and Directions for Future Research**

*To be developed when I have completed my data analyses for the rest of the years.*

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## **Research Proposal**

Domestic Political Concern as Additional Deterrent to Chinese Invasion of Taiwan

### **Introduction and Roadmap**

On August 2, 2022, then-U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan via a U.S. Air Force transport plane, marking the first visit by an incumbent House Speaker in 25 years. This triggered an unprecedented show of military force by China, including missile launches over Taipei and a large-scale naval blockade surrounding the island, which the Carnegie Endowment described as setting a new "status quo."[[50]](#footnote-50) Many analysists feared this might be the turning point toward a full-scale Chinese invasion. Yet, despite its increasingly aggressive rhetoric and growing military power, China has not taken direct military action to force reunification. This raises a crucial question: Why has China refrained from invading Taiwan despite its growing military power and stated political intentions?

Scholars and policymakers have predominantly explained China’s restraint through two key deterrence mechanisms:

Military Deterrence: Taiwan’s defense strategies, U.S. security commitments, and the broader risks of regional escalation raise the military costs of an invasion.

Economic Interdependence: China’s deep integration into global trade networks, economic interdependence with Taiwan, and reliance on key technological imports create economic disincentives for war.

While both explanations provide valuable insights, they fail to fully account for Beijing’s continued restraint, especially as China’s military power approaches parity with the United States[[51]](#footnote-51) and its economy increasingly shifts toward self-sufficiency[[52]](#footnote-52). If military deterrence and economic interdependence were the sole determining factors constraining China’s actions, Beijing would either have already launched an invasion or would have become much more aggressive toward Taiwan.

As a result, this study addresses the following question: **Beyond traditional military deterrence and economic interdependence explanations, what else explains Beijing’s restraints toward the reunification of Taiwan?**

I argue that China is deterred from invading Taiwan not only by external deterrents but also by domestic political concerns that pose an existential threat to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This domestic politics deterrent follows a causal chain, wherein the CCP anticipates that war-induced governance difficulties, military setbacks, and economic contractions would undermine citizens’ perceptions of the CCP’s performance legitimacy and ultimately threaten regime survival. This legitimacy is separate from international legitimacy and functions within domestic governance concerns only. This domestic political survival threat, coupled with fears in military deterrence and pacifying effects of economic interdependence from traditional deterrence perspective, together constrain a Chinese invasion of Taiwan.

The remainder of this proposal is divided into two sections: argument and research design. The argument section elaborates on the significance of the research question and summarizes how other scholars have answered this question; it then situates the governance-legitimacy-survival mechanism within existing scholarship and details how this mechanism builds upon pure military and economic explanations. The section also defines key terms, establishes theoretical foundations, and presents a visualization of the causal logic. The research design section outlines empirical expectations and justifies the use of public opinion surveys, sentiment analysis of Chinese social media and official documents, and historical case studies to test the theory, while also addressing some variable operationalization and methodological considerations.

### **Argument Section**

Scholars have attempted to address this puzzle by emphasizing external constraints, particularly military deterrence and economic deterrence, as key factors preventing China from taking military action. However, these explanations are becoming increasing insufficient as China’s military power approaches parity with the United States and its economy becomes more resilient to Western pressures.

*Military Deterrence as the First Dominant Explanation*

Scholars of military deterrence argue that strict, material-based military deterrence mechanisms raise the cost of invasion beyond an acceptable threshold for Beijing. Rationalist theory of war argues that leaders weigh the credible commitment problems and uncertainties in any conflict[[53]](#footnote-53). China’s leadership may doubt its ability to swiftly conquer Taiwan. Taiwan’s geographic advantages, including its mountainous terrain, shallow waters, and heavily fortified coastline, make amphibious landings extremely difficult, limiting the effectiveness of a rapid conquest[[54]](#footnote-54). Moreover, Taiwan has invested significantly in asymmetric defense strategies, such as mobile missile launchers, sea mines, and anti-ship missiles, which could effectively counter a large-scale amphibious assault by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA)[[55]](#footnote-55). U.S. military presence and commitments are also existent. The long-standing policy of strategic ambiguity leaves the possibility of direct U.S. intervention open, forcing China to consider the risk of a broader regional conflict[[56]](#footnote-56). The presence of U.S. forces in Japan, South Korea, and Guam, along with arms sales to Taiwan, enhances Taipei’s ability to resist aggression. U.S. military doctrine also includes strategies aimed at “system overload”, where China’s ability to fight a war in Taiwan would be compromised by simultaneous pressures on other fronts, including potential U.S. or allied actions in the South China Sea or Indian Ocean[[57]](#footnote-57). Allied participation is supported by both signed mutual defense treaties and the existence of regional norms. Simmons (2000) finds that regional norms encourage a state’s compliance when neighboring states have already done so[[58]](#footnote-58). Additionally, nuclear deterrence remains an overarching constraint. Although China maintains a “no first use” nuclear policy, it faces the reality that a prolonged conflict in Taiwan could escalate in unpredictable ways, increasing the risks to China’s broader national security interests[[59]](#footnote-59).

However, with the rapid expansion and modernization of the PLA’s military capacities—evidenced by the deployment of additional aircraft carriers, amphibious assault ships, sixth-generation fighter jets, and advanced tactical missiles—the power gap between China and the U.S. is narrowing[[60]](#footnote-60). This shift, as suggested by classic Power Transition Theory[[61]](#footnote-61), increases the likelihood of conflict, as rising powers seek to challenge the declining hegemon when they perceive a closing military advantage. Empirical findings by Kim and Gates (2015)[[62]](#footnote-62) support this perspective, particularly in the context of China’s rise, **suggesting that military deterrence alone is insufficient to fully explain why Beijing has refrained from invading Taiwan to force reunification**.

*Economic Interdependence as the Second Dominant Explanation*

The second dominant explanation is economic interdependence, which suggests that China avoids war due to deep trade and financial linkages that make conflict too costly. Classical liberal research suggests free trade reduces the likelihood of war[[63]](#footnote-63). Recent research on international trade and political relations[[64]](#footnote-64) have also suggested that countries with high levels of economic interdependence posit stronger avoidance of conflict, as disruptions to trade directly impact domestic growth and employment. International trade is pivotal to China’s production and trade for its export-oriented economy and growth-based model[[65]](#footnote-65), as the country needs to obtain key production materials from, as well as selling its product to the international market.

Economic sanctions historically have had a significant impact on countries engaged in military conflicts. For example, the sanctions imposed on Russia following its annexation of Crimea and its war on Ukraine led to measurable declines in trade and GDP, particularly due to reduced access to global financial markets and technology[[66]](#footnote-66). Similarly, sweeping sanctions imposed after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine disrupted Russia’s economy by limiting its ability to trade with Western nations, resulting in long-term economic consequences despite initial resilience[[67]](#footnote-67).

China’s economy, deeply integrated into global trade networks, would likely suffer similar repercussions if it launched a military invasion of Taiwan. The U.S.-China trade war demonstrated how restrictions on exports and tariffs could lead to economic slowdowns, reduced market access, and disrupted supply chains[[68]](#footnote-68). Given that China depends on foreign technology transfers, semiconductor imports, and consumer markets in North America, Europe, and Asia, an invasion would trigger economic isolation and hurt the operation and development of its key industries.

Several studies have explored the specific role of economic interdependence in deterring conflict across the Taiwan Strait and found supporting evidence. Drezner, Farrell, and Newman (2021) argue that extensive trade and investment ties between China and Taiwan elevate the opportunity cost of war, making military escalation less rational for both sides[[69]](#footnote-69). Similarly, Kastner (2006) finds that cross-strait economic integration reduces the likelihood of conflict by fostering mutual dependencies[[70]](#footnote-70).

However, recent trends toward economic and political decoupling[[71]](#footnote-71)—accelerated by Pelosi’s 2022 visit—combined with Beijing’s growing willingness to prioritize political objectives over economic stability[[72]](#footnote-72), **have weakened the effectiveness of this deterrent.**

While military and economic deterrence have traditionally been viewed as the primary constraints on a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, both explanations are becoming increasingly insufficient. As China’s military capabilities grow and its economy becomes more resilient to external pressures, Beijing may become less deterred by these external constraints alone. This raises the question: if military and economic deterrence are weakening, what other factors contribute to China’s continued restraint?

*My Original Theoretical Answer*

I argue that beyond external constraints, domestic political concerns—specifically those related to domestic governance performance and domestic political legitimacy—serve as a critical internal deterrent. The Chinese Communist Party does not only weigh the strategic and economic costs of war, arising from external deterrents, but also anticipates the internal political risks that an invasion could trigger. The CCP fears that war-induced governance difficulties, military setbacks, and economic contractions could undermine Chinese citizen’s perceptions of the party’s domestic performance legitimacy and ultimately threaten regime survival in domestic political context. This governance-domestic legitimacy-survival mechanism operates as a form of self-deterrence, functioning as a separate mechanism from traditional deterrence considerations, constrains Beijing’s decision-making even as external deterrents weaken.

Citizen’s perception and expectation of livelihood under the CCP is directly linked to regime survival. If the public perceives that their living quality is in bad shape, and have low expectations for a future prosperous life, they will not support the regime.

### *Legitimacy as a Deterrent*

I propose that China’s self-imposed restraint is best understood through a governance-legitimacy-survival mechanism, in which the CCP anticipates that war-induced governance difficulties would erode its domestic political legitimacy and ultimately threatening its survival. This mechanism follows a causal chain:

1. War creates governance challenges: A large-scale conflict would trigger administrative, economic, and social disruptions that undermine effective governance. These include managing wartime resource allocation, responding to economic contractions, and administering a post-war Taiwan.
2. Governance failures erode CCP domestic legitimacy: The CCP derives domestic political legitimacy not from elections but from economic performance and responding to the needs of its people, particularly its ability to maintain economic stability, national strength, and social order (Gerschewski 2013; Tang 2016[[73]](#footnote-73)). If war leads to economic decline, military setbacks, or administrative failures, the CCP’s credibility would weaken.
3. Domestic political legitimacy erosion poses an existential threat to regime survival: When domestic political legitimacy is low, public support for the party diminishes, and the party might collapse (Tang, 2016[[74]](#footnote-74)).

Unlike traditional deterrence, which relies on external punishment, this mechanism operates endogenous—the CCP is deterred by its own anticipation of these risks. **Even if China could militarily defeat Taiwan or absorb economic sanctions, the anticipated governance difficulties and legitimacy threats create a powerful self-imposed constraint on war.**

What constitutes governance-legitimacy-survival challenges? These challenges stem from several key factors that would complicate effective rule and long-term regime stability in both mainland China and Taiwan following an invasive war. Governance failures would erode the CCP’s legitimacy, which in turn would pose an existential threat to the regime.

First, governing a wartime regime differs significantly from peacetime governance. Civilian production would be subordinated to military needs, and everyday activities—such as shopping, entertainment, and travel—would become severely restricted, leading to civic dissatisfaction with the government. Wartime production and rationing would drastically limit access to goods and services, conditions that have historically led to social unrest and noncompliance, as seen during World War II[[75]](#footnote-75). These disruptions would strain CCP control over the home front, increasing the risk of domestic instability.

Second, a war in the Taiwan Strait is expected to cause widespread destruction to production facilities, infrastructure, and livelihoods, particularly in China’s economically vital coastal provinces as a product of military deterrence. The government would not only need to address immediate humanitarian crisis but also manage the long-term economic reconstruction of both Taiwan and the mainland under global sanctions and trade restrictions. These governance difficulties would undermine the CCP’s public image, weakening its ability to maintain stability and economic prosperity—both core pillars of its domestic legitimacy.

Third, even if the Chinese government can maintain authoritarian control on the mainland, ruling a former democracy of 24 million people—many of whom strongly identify as Taiwanese—under an authoritarian system would present significant difficulties, both materially and ideologically. *Materially*, Tseng (2018)[[76]](#footnote-76) illustrates how the Kuomintang (KMT) wartime regime struggled with economic recession, resource shortages, and famine in the immediate postwar period—challenges that the CCP could similarly face under international sanctions and economic isolation following an invasion. *Ideologically*, the clash between Taiwan’s history of democratic-governance and Beijing’s centralized, high-pressure autocracy would likely generate intense political resistance. Furthermore, the conflict between Taiwanese identity and Beijing’s vision of a unified Chinese identity would foster deep distrust of CCP rule and intensify demands for political representation, as seen during both the KMT’s early rule of Taiwan[[77]](#footnote-77) and the political turmoil in Hong Kong[[78]](#footnote-78). These expectations suggest Beijing that it might face prolonged opposition; these oppositions might form coalitions with mainland’s activist groups, impacting the social stability and further weakening the CCP’s domestic political legitimacy.

Governance challenges, under high-pressure suppressions, do not necessarily deter military action; what makes them a powerful constraint is that they directly threaten regime survival. Gerschewski (2013) identifies legitimacy, repression, and co-option as the three fundamental pillars that ensure the endurance of autocratic regimes, including China[[79]](#footnote-79). He argues that Beijing successfully restored public legitimacy after the 1989 Tiananmen protests by leveraging a combination of economic performance, nationalism, and ideological control. Similarly, Tang (2016) emphasizes the role of domestic political legitimacy in the CCP’s regime survival, noting that the party remains highly responsive to the needs and interests of the majority—primarily in the form of tangible economic growth—since it lacks the legitimacy derived from direct elections[[80]](#footnote-80). Zweig (2002) further supports this view, asserting that the CCP’s political survival is closely tied to economic growth[[81]](#footnote-81). In this framework, successful governance—characterized by sustained economic growth and responsiveness to public interests—remains central to the CCP’s legitimacy and long-term rule. However, given the near certainty of economic decline, civilian hardships, and perceptions of bad governance in the event of war, the CCP is expected to lose domestic political legitimacy that matters to its survival if it declares a war on Taiwan. As survival is the CCP’s primary goal, a war that threatens this goal will not be considered.

Thus, I argue that governance-legitimacy-survival challenges, rather than merely external military or economic deterrents, serve as a core internal constraint preventing a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. This causal chain—war-induced governance difficulties leading to legitimacy erosion and, ultimately, regime survival concerns—creates a powerful self-imposed deterrent, helping explain why Beijing has thus far refrained from launching a full-scale invasion of Taiwan.

A diagram of a political system

AI-generated content may be incorrect.The following diagram visualizes my theoretical framework.

Diagram 1. External Deterrent and Domestic Political Deterrent Collectively Deter Chinese Invasion of Taiwan.

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