

TAIWAN 2024–2025: CONSTRAINT, ADAPTATION, AND THE CROSS-STRAIT  
EQUILIBRIUM

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*This article analyses political and security developments in Taiwan during the 2024–2025 biennium, focusing on the interaction between domestic political fragmentation, evolving relations with the United States, and the consolidation of Chinese military coercion in the Taiwan Strait. It argues that the transition to divided government produced a structurally weakened presidency, in which legislative obstruction and constitutional contestation entrenched a persistent condition of governance under constraint. Against this domestic backdrop, the article examines the recalibration of Taiwan–US relations in an increasingly uncertain and transactional environment, where established practices of symbolic management—most notably presidential transit diplomacy—proved more vulnerable to disruption than in previous cycles, while leadership change within the Kuomintang introduced additional layers of cross-Strait signalling under conditions of institutional fragility. The article further traces the evolution of Chinese military activity around Taiwan, highlighting the shift from episodic signalling to routinised drills and grey-zone operations as a stabilised instrument of pressure. It also considers how Taipei has begun to recalibrate elements of its external projection and domestic political agenda in response to evolving relations with Washington under Trump 2.0 and to the increasingly assertive strategic environment shaped by Beijing. Taken together, developments during the period under review point not to strategic realignment, but to the reproduction of constraint, as domestic political vulnerability, uncertain US signalling, and sustained Chinese coercion interacted to reinforce a condition of managed but unresolved structural vulnerability within the regional order.*

KEYWORDS – Taiwan; cross-Strait relations; US–Taiwan relations; China.

## 1. *Introduction*

The analysis aims to explore a set of dynamics shaping Taiwan's political and strategic environment during the 2024–2025 biennium. It examines how the outcome of the January 2024 elections translated into a condition of divided government, producing persistent legislative–executive friction and constraining executive authority. These institutional patterns are considered alongside symbolic and discursive processes—including the management of transitional justice and the recalibration of official language—which together may have contributed to a reconfiguration of the domestic political field. Against this domestic setting, attention turns to developments in the security environment of the Taiwan Strait, which during the biennium can be interpreted as moving toward a condition of sustained and routinised coercion. Chinese military drills, grey-zone operations, and multidomain activities are thus approached not as episodic signalling, but as stabilised practices that progressively redefined operational thresholds, compressed strategic warning time, and conditioned Taiwan's day-to-day governance and crisis management. These developments are further situated within Taiwan's external exposure, with particular focus on the interaction between persistent coercive pressure and growing uncertainty in relations with the United States. Consideration is given to the coexistence of strategic ambiguity, increasingly transactional economic practices, and intensified congressional activism, and to the extent to which these dynamics may have shaped deterrence frameworks and defence planning under conditions of domestic constraint. The analysis also briefly considers the gradual recalibration of the domestic agenda of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which in recent years has moved away from some of the themes more prominently associated with the Tsai Ing-wen administration—particularly in the field of gender politics—in part to maintain closer alignment with Washington amid shifting ideological dynamics in the United States. The discussion also addresses the repositioning of key political actors and external interlocutors, including the Kuomintang's (KMT) leadership transition and the expansion of Taiwan's diplomatic engagement with European and other like-minded partners.<sup>1</sup> Taken together, these dynamics are approached as contributing to a broader pattern of governance under constraint, through which institutional fragmentation, external pressure, and

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<sup>1</sup> «Like-minded partners» was extensively used by Taipei in 2023–2024 to frame Taiwan's international engagement within the Indo-Pacific discourse and to emphasise shared commitments to democracy, values, and a rules-based order [Hornung et al. 2023]. Despite growing uncertainty over the concept's durability under the Trump presidency, it has continued to feature prominently in Taiwan's relations with European states and regional partners such as Japan and Australia.

strategic adjustment appear to have reinforced one another without fundamentally altering Taiwan's structural position within the regional order. The period also witnessed a gradual reformulation of Taiwan's political agenda and public narratives, including the growing prominence of representations of the Chinese threat—previously less explicit in official discourse—as well as a renewed articulation of Taiwan's role in the international arena and the global economy. Whereas in earlier years Taipei tended to maintain a relatively low international profile in order to preserve extensive economic ties with the People's Republic of China (PRC), the current strategic environment has increasingly pushed Taiwan to leverage its centrality in semiconductor supply chains as a key instrument of economic and geopolitical positioning.

## *2. Fragmentation, Re-Signification, and Governance under Constraint*

### *2.1. Electoral Fragmentation and the Reconfiguration of Transitional Justice*

Despite securing the presidency in January 2024, the DPP entered the new electoral cycle in a weakened parliamentary position. For the first time since 2016, the DPP failed to secure a majority in the Legislative Yuan, producing a fragmented legislature in which opposition forces retained decisive agenda-setting capacity [Insisa 2023]. This immediately constrained executive action and heightened the role of inter-party bargaining, in line with assessments advanced by several observers and scholars following the electoral outcome [Dreyer 2024]. The implications of this configuration became evident in April 2024. On 13 April, Kuomintang-backed candidates won five out of six local by-elections, including the mayoralty of Miaoli City, confirming the opposition's capacity to consolidate subnational momentum [Everington 2024, 24 May].

In this context, and in the days immediately preceding President Lai Ching-te's formal inauguration, the Cabinet announced on 18 April 2024 the establishment of 19 May as Taiwan's annual White Terror Memorial Day, to be officially commemorated for the first time in May 2024 [Lin 2024, 18 April]. Endorsed by Premier Chen Chien-jen, the decision framed the remembrance of political repression under KMT rule between 1949 and the late 1980s as a core element of Taiwan's transitional justice agenda. Beyond its commemorative function, this initiative situates Taiwan's democratic identity in explicit opposition to the authoritarian legacy of the post-war Republic of China (ROC) regime, while privileging narratives of democratisation, repression, and societal pluralism [Schubert 2012] over

those centred on the ROC's state-building experience in exile. In historical perspective, the trajectory of transitional justice under successive Democratic Progressive Party administrations has evolved unevenly and under varying institutional constraints.

During the presidency of Chen Shui-bian, early efforts to address authoritarian-era abuses unfolded in a context of divided government and limited executive leverage. Some limited legislative steps were adopted, most notably the 2007 amendment to the 228 Compensation Act, which replaced the term *bu chang* with *pei chang*,<sup>2</sup> implicitly reframing past state violence as illegal rather than merely compensable [Bowman 2012]. The change, however, produced limited political and judicial consequences, reflecting both the structural weakness of Chen's mandate and the premature character of transitional justice initiatives in a still-consolidating democratic environment. A more systematic phase began under Tsai Ing-wen, whose two terms were supported by a DPP parliamentary majority. This configuration enabled the establishment of institutional mechanisms such as the Ill-gotten Party Assets Settlement Committee [Ill-gotten Properties Act 2016, 10 August] and the Transitional Justice Commission [Yeh & Su 2019]. While the former targeted the Kuomintang's inherited financial networks and organisational advantages, critics described this phase as «political competition, not a quest for transitional justice» [Huang 2021, p. 228], suggesting that financial and institutional rebalancing intersected with partisan dynamics. At the same time, the work of the Transitional Justice Commission emphasised archival declassification, restitution, and Indigenous historical justice, contributing to a process centred on the recognition and subjectivisation of victims. Yet this approach remained comparatively cautious in identifying individual responsibility for authoritarian crimes, favouring restorative and symbolic measures over judicial accountability.

In this respect, it risked reproducing what has been described in relation to earlier transitional justice efforts as «ten thousand victims without a single perpetrator» [Wu 2005, p. 78]. By contrast, the establishment of White Terror Memorial Day in 2024 occurred under conditions of divided government and reduced executive control. Rather than forming part of a broad institutional reform programme—as under Tsai—or representing an embryonic attempt constrained by structural weakness—as under Chen—the initiative functioned primarily as a symbolic reaffirmation of democratic

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<sup>2</sup> The first term corresponds to the notion of compensation, whereas the second is more accurately translated as reparation, carrying with it an explicit sense of moral — and consequently historical — responsibility, rather than a mere monetary quantification of the damages suffered by the victims.

identity within a fragmented political environment. In this sense, transitional justice under Lai appeared less as an instrument of structural transformation than as a discursive resource mobilised within a broader pattern of governance under constraint.

In doing so, it contributes to the consolidation of a Taiwan-centred historical consciousness whose implications extend beyond memory politics, shaping the discursive field within which notions of security, sovereignty, and the configuration of relations across the Taiwan Strait are constructed, stabilised, and periodically renegotiated [Corcuff 2012].

## *2.2. Institutional Polarisation and the Limits of Executive Authority*

The legislative fragility of the Lai administration translated rapidly into institutional confrontation during the parliamentary reform process of May 2024. In mid-May, debates over amendments expanding the oversight powers of the Legislative Yuan escalated into repeated physical altercations between legislators affiliated with the DPP—holding the presidency but lacking a parliamentary majority—and the Kuomintang–Taiwan People’s Party (TPP) alignment controlling the legislative agenda [CNA 2024a]. Accelerated procedures and curtailed deliberation sharpened contestation over the redistribution of institutional authority within a legislature no longer aligned with the executive. This tension was further amplified by the close linkage between the reform package and scrutiny of defence policy and military procurement. In a context of heightened cross-Strait pressure, disputes over parliamentary procedure thus acquired an added strategic dimension, intertwining constitutional conflict with the governance of national security. This configuration marked a distinctive moment in Taiwan’s recent political trajectory. Earlier episodes of divided government—such as during the two presidencies of Chen Shui-bian—or moments of declining governmental consensus, including the electoral setbacks experienced by the Tsai administration in midterm local elections, unfolded within less acute strategic environments. By contrast, the present confrontation developed amid intensifying Chinese coercion and increasingly explicit expectations from Washington that Taiwan strengthen its own defence capabilities. As a result, parliamentary conflicts over institutional authority came to involve policy domains considered vital within Beijing’s growing assertiveness toward the island and within the United States’ evolving security expectations toward Taipei.

The amendments expanded legislators’ powers to summon government officials, military representatives, private companies, and private individuals. They also introduced criminal penalties for «contempt of the legislature» and required the president to report regularly to parliament

and submit to questioning—an unprecedented provision in Taiwan’s constitutional practice [CNA 2024b]. While the KMT and the TPP framed these measures as a corrective to executive dominance and a reinforcement of legislative oversight, critics, including legal associations and civil society groups, raised concerns over vague definitions, weak safeguards, and the potential politicisation of sensitive information, particularly in defence-related domains. These tensions extended beyond the Legislative Yuan; from 21 May 2024 onward, and with greater intensity following the passage of the reforms on 28 May, large-scale demonstrations unfolded around the legislature, mobilised by a broad coalition of civic groups [CNA 2024c]. In public debate, and within segments of the DPP, these mobilisations were at times framed as a reactivation of the 2014 Sunflower Movement, emphasising presumed organisational and generational continuity. This framing, however, only partially reflected the empirical configuration of the protests, which remained largely confined to the pan-Green camp—centred on the DPP—rather than reproducing the cross-cutting dynamics of 2014 [Ho 2010; Ho 2019]. As a result, street-level mobilisation generated limited resonance beyond established partisan constituencies. Across the biennium under examination, the absence of executive control over the Legislative Yuan constituted a persistent source of institutional fragility, limiting the presidency’s capacity to consolidate authority and to coordinate policy across domains. This condition of fragmented institutional alignment increasingly translated into a pattern of governance under constraint, in which domestic political vulnerability and external strategic pressure interacted, shaping both the management of security affairs and the evolving parameters of cross-Strait relations.

### *2.3. Semantic Recalibration and the Erosion of Cross-Strait Discursive Equilibria*

In his inaugural address of 20 May 2024, Lai articulated a recalibrated semantic framework for cross-Strait relations [Lai 2024] that combined formal adherence to the status quo with a more explicit assertion of political separation from the PRC.<sup>3</sup> While reiterating the absence of any intention to pursue either formal independence or unification, Lai defined Beijing as a source of political and military intimidation and called on China to cease coercive practices. He further urged recognition of the empirical reality that the ROC and the PRC constitute two distinct and non-subordinate political

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<sup>3</sup> Taiwanese presidential inaugural addresses have been widely analysed as discursive sites for defining Taiwan in relation to both the PRC and Chinese culture and identity. See amongst others [Hsu, Lai & Liu 2022; Lu & Ahrens 2008].

entities [OPROC 2024]. Compared with the inaugural addresses of Tsai Ing-wen [Tsai 2016; Tsai 2020], in which the formula of maintaining the status quo was consistently reaffirmed while being endowed with an increasingly proactive semantic content [Sullivan 2024], Lai's discourse was characterised by a reduced reliance on strategic ambiguity. It also displayed a more explicit articulation of political and normative difference, notably through the centrality accorded to democracy and the strengthening of relations with the United States.

From Beijing's perspective, such language was readily interpreted as an attempt to «Taiwanise» the constitutional framework of the ROC and to advance a form of de facto independence through discursive means [XHW 2024]. While this shift has often been attributed to personal differences between Lai and his predecessor, it is more accurately understood as reflecting the progressive erosion of the informal structure that had long regulated cross-Strait relations through a fragile «semantic compromise» [Pelaggi 2022] and an implicit «agreement on disagreement» [Congiu and Onnis 2022]. This framework, which also underpinned the triangular equilibrium among Taipei, Beijing, and Washington, relied on deliberate ambiguity, selective silences, and the coexistence of divergent interpretations [Pelaggi 2023]. Within such a system, meaning was produced not only through explicit statements but also through omission and semantic restraint, rendering each lexical choice a consequential element in the maintenance of stability across the Strait. As Beijing's assertiveness became increasingly pronounced in the years following 2020, the space for discursive ambiguity narrowed accordingly, constraining the semantic margins within which Taipei could operate and shaping both the tone and the conceptual boundaries of Lai's inaugural address.

#### *2.4. Symbolic Politics, Constitutional Conflict, and Systemic Political Stress*

Beyond parliamentary confrontation, the first year of Lai's presidency was characterised by a convergence of symbolic, legal, and security-related developments that subtly reshaped the contours of Taiwan's domestic–external nexus. In July 2024, the government announced the withdrawal of military honour guards from the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall as part of broader transitional justice efforts [Reuters 2024a]. While not constituting a decisive rupture, the move signalled a further distancing from the historical legacy of the ROC and contributed to a gradual re-signification of public memory, reinforcing a Taiwan-centred political identity.

This symbolic recalibration unfolded alongside a parallel hardening of the cross-Strait security environment. In June, Beijing formally

criminalised so-called separatist behaviour by Taiwanese citizens [RMW 2024], prompting Taipei to issue official travel advisories discouraging visits to the PRC, Hong Kong, and Macao [Sampson 2024]. At the institutional level, the same period witnessed a marked escalation of constitutional conflict. In October, the Constitutional Court struck down key elements of the parliamentary reform package adopted in May on separation-of-powers grounds [Hioe 2024, 1 November], while subsequent legislative manoeuvres aimed at altering the Court's procedural framework—combined with renewed physical confrontation in the Legislative Yuan in December [Garcia & Khan 2024, 20 December]—further exposed the fragility of Taiwan's constitutional equilibrium under conditions of divided government [Yang 2025, 3 December].

In this context, the arrest and subsequent detention of Ko Wen-je in September 2024 added a further source of political volatility. While not unprecedented in Taiwan's post-authoritarian trajectory, the investigation of a former presidential candidate who had emerged outside the two major parties disrupted established patterns of party competition.<sup>4</sup> From a comparative perspective, Ko's trajectory resonated with broader dynamics of populism in established democracies, characterised by leader-centred mobilisation, digital visibility, and episodic surges of support [Liu 2025]—particularly among younger voters disaffected with Taiwan's dominant political camps [Nachman 2024]. This development intersected with an atypical interpretation of the China factor: unlike the structured DPP–KMT cleavage, Ko's political project approached cross-Strait relations in a largely de-ideologised and situational manner [Chen & Paris-Rodriguez 2024], introducing an additional layer of strategic indeterminacy into an already fragmented political landscape. The episode thus exposed the structural fragility of a political formation closely tied to individual charisma, weakening the TPP at a moment of heightened parliamentary relevance and leaving unresolved the question of Ko's capacity to re-emerge as a durable political actor, despite tentative efforts at repositioning in late 2025.

In their cumulative effect, these developments illustrate how pressures on Taiwan's political order during 2024 did not operate along isolated tracks, but intersected across memory politics, constitutional

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<sup>4</sup> A useful interpretative lens is provided by Yeh and Chang's analysis of East Asian constitutionalism, which highlights the growing juridification of politics. In Taiwan, judicial proceedings against political actors had long constituted a recurrent feature of party competition, appeared to recede in prominence during periods of consolidated governance, and have re-emerged more forcefully under recent conditions of political fragmentation, shaping electoral and inter-party dynamics without translating into overt constitutional conflict between branches of government [Yeh & Chang 2011].

governance, judicial accountability, and cross-Strait security, contributing to a sustained climate of institutional and strategic tension.

### *2.5. Divided Government, Recall Politics, and the Stabilisation of Domestic Volatility*

In October 2024, the Constitutional Court struck down key elements of the parliamentary reform package adopted by the KMT–TPP alignment, sharpening executive–legislative confrontation, which in December again degenerated into procedural paralysis and physical disorder within the Legislative Yuan. The early months of 2025 further exposed the volatility of the political landscape. Internal strains within the Taiwan People’s Party surfaced with the election of Huang Kuo-chang as acting party chair in February [CNA 2025a], followed shortly by the resignation of TPP legislator Wu Chun-cheng over alleged conflicts of interest. In March, President Lai adopted a more securitised public posture by explicitly labelling China a «foreign hostile force» [Davidson 2025, 14 March] and announcing new national security measures, including plans to reinstate a peacetime military court system—moves reflecting both heightened external pressure and increasingly constrained domestic margins for manoeuvre.

Against this backdrop, the legislative recall elections of July 2025 emerged as the clearest indicator of presidential fragility. Initiated in the aftermath of the 2024 elections and framed by their proponents as a corrective to opposition obstructionism under conditions of external threat, the recall campaign targeted a substantial bloc of KMT legislators [CNA 2025b]. Its comprehensive failure—none of the 24 opposition lawmakers lost their seats—confirmed the limits of extra-parliamentary strategies to rebalance power and underscored the durability of institutional fragmentation. Rather than resolving the impasse produced by divided government, the recall episode consolidated a condition of prolonged political stress, in which domestic polarisation, weakened executive leverage, and persistent pressure from the PRC interacted to shape Taiwan’s political trajectory. A further consequence of the failed recall campaign was the emergence of frictions between the DPP and the civic groups that had promoted the initiative. Within pro-recall circles, the DPP was increasingly accused of having offered only cautious and instrumental support [CNA 2025c], without fully committing its organisational resources to a strategy whose prospects it was perceived not to have genuinely embraced—a perception reinforced by electoral figures [Hsieh 2025b, 18 August] showing weak mobilisation even in constituencies traditionally considered DPP strongholds.

This perception contrasted with the precedent of 2020, when the recall of Kaohsiung mayor Han Kuo-yu—the first successful recall of a major executive officeholder in Taiwan’s democratic history—had unfolded in a markedly different political conjuncture [Insisa 2021, p. 203]. That episode coincided with the Hong Kong protests and a phase of heightened cross-Strait anxiety, which facilitated mobilisation and contributed to the consolidation of political support around President Tsai Ing-wen. By contrast, the 2025 recall initiatives unfolded in a context of pronounced political fragmentation, marked by divided government, reduced executive agenda-setting capacity, and a less cohesive civil-society response. In contrast to earlier episodes of mobilisation, the China factor appeared less immediately galvanising, as sustained coercive pressure had become increasingly normalised within public perception. Rather than triggering collective political activation, external pressure was increasingly managed through forms of societal and institutional «denial» [Shetler-Jones 2025, 31 March]—understood as the absorption and neutralisation of coercive effects. In this sense, repeated exposure to coercion produced a degree of political habituation, stabilising patterns of domestic behaviour under pressure while progressively eroding the mobilising capacity of securitised narratives centred on China within Taiwan’s internal political arena.

### *2.6. Repositioning the Kuomintang: Leadership Change and Cross-Strait Signalling*

The October 2025 election of Cheng Li-wun as KMT chair marked an unexpected inflection in the party’s contemporary trajectory, both in terms of leadership profile and cross-Strait positioning [TVBS 2026]. Cheng emerged as an atypical figure within the party: a former DPP member later incorporated into the KMT, whose ascent was driven less by organisational seniority than by sharp rhetorical positioning and a highly personalised, media-oriented mobilisation strategy. Her campaign combined calls for internal renewal with populist appeals to party members disaffected by prolonged electoral stagnation, temporarily marginalising established patterns of factional brokerage and signalling a moment of organisational fluidity within the party.

At the level of cross-Strait discourse, Cheng’s leadership entailed a clearer departure from the KMT’s customary balancing posture between Washington and Beijing. Her rhetoric leaned more openly toward an accommodationist register vis-à-vis the mainland, while normalising a sceptical assessment of US reliability [Reuters 2025a, 18 October]. By framing Taiwan’s strategic risk through the language of avoidance—warning against being «sacrificed» or reduced to a bargaining chip in a broader US-

PRC deal—and coupling calls for «peace» with opposition to major increases in defence spending, she implicitly relocated the party’s discursive centre of gravity closer to Beijing’s preferred vocabulary of stability-through-engagement. This repositioning was rapidly reinforced by external signalling following her election, most notably a congratulatory message from Xi Jinping praising the Kuomintang’s role in promoting cross-Strait exchanges based on the 1992 Consensus and reiterating opposition to «Taiwan independence» [Reuters 2025b, 1 November; AP News 2025, 18 October].

In parallel with this outward-facing repositioning toward Beijing, Cheng’s early tenure as KMT chair was also marked by a recalibration of interaction with the United States. Despite a campaign rhetoric openly sceptical of US reliability and critical of Taiwan’s security dependence on Washington, Cheng received the Director of the American Institute in Taiwan,<sup>5</sup> Raymond Greene, at KMT headquarters in Taipei in November 2025 [CNA 2025d, 13 November]. While formally framed around conventional affirmations of Taiwan–US relations and cross-Strait stability, the meeting carried symbolic significance by virtue of both its location and timing, signalling Washington’s willingness to sustain direct engagement with Taiwan’s principal opposition force amid heightened sensitivity in executive-level exchanges. This selective engagement unfolded against a simultaneous contraction of presidential visibility. In July 2025, President Lai was denied permission to conduct a planned stopover in New York while transiting to Central America, following objections raised by Beijing and amid ongoing US-China trade negotiations [Sevastopulo & Hille 2025, 28 July]. Although not a formal policy shift, the decision disrupted a long-established practice through which Taiwanese presidents had exercised limited yet symbolically salient international presence, traditionally functioning as a ritualised instrument of semantic equilibrium within the triangular relationship linking Taipei, Washington, and Beijing.

### *3. Routinised Coercion and Operational Innovation: Chinese Military Drills in the Taiwan Strait*

#### *3.1. From Episodic Signalling to Sustained Operational Density*

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<sup>5</sup> The American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) serves as the de facto US embassy in Taiwan, performing diplomatic, consular, and security-related functions in the absence of formal relations. Similar representative offices are maintained in Taipei by the vast majority of international actors.

Throughout 2024–2025, the regularisation of Chinese military drills in and around the Taiwan Strait provided a persistent strategic backdrop to Taiwan’s domestic politics. Against this background, governance under divided government proved increasingly fragile. Under these conditions, governance under constraint emerged as a defining structural feature of Taiwan’s strategic posture in the 2024–2025 biennium. The absence of stable institutional alignment at the domestic level intersected with an external security environment increasingly shaped by routinised coercive practices, narrowing the range of policy discretion available to the executive. Within this configuration, Chinese military drills and grey-zone operations, analysed in this paragraph, did not merely constitute an exogenous source of pressure. In earlier years, including during some of the more tense phases of cross-Strait relations, the prospect of open conflict rarely occupied a central place in Taiwan’s official storytelling, which tended instead to frame relations with Beijing primarily through the language of coercion, deterrence, and Taiwan’s constrained international status. Explicit references to scenarios involving direct military confrontation—such as large-scale hostilities, an amphibious assault, or the imposition of a blockade—were generally less prominent in official narratives. More recently, however, such possibilities have appeared with greater frequency in political and strategic debates, gradually becoming part of the context within which governmental action, crisis management, and the day-to-day calibration of security policy are discussed and articulated.

The security architecture of the Taiwan Strait during the 2024–2025 biennium underwent a marked qualitative transformation, evolving from the reactive «new normal» consolidated after 2022 [Insisa 2023, p. 134] toward a more institutionalised regime of routinised coercion [Pelaggi 2025, pp. 38–39]. Rather than constituting a sharp rupture with earlier patterns of pressure, developments during this period reflected the consolidation and extension of pre-existing dynamics, characterised by the regularisation of military activity and the progressive lowering of thresholds associated with presence, proximity, and operational visibility. Over this period, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) increasingly demonstrated the capacity to synchronise high-intensity kinetic signalling with targeted grey-zone measures, deploying a diversified toolkit that combined conventional military assets with paramilitary and civilian instruments. The cumulative objective of this approach was not the immediate generation of crisis, but the gradual erosion of Taiwan’s defensive depth through persistent proximity, multidomain presence, and the redefinition of what constitutes routine activity in and around the Strait [Singh 2025, p. 23].

This logic materialised most clearly in the systematic intensification of aerial and naval activity throughout 2024. Between 2 and 3 April 2024, the

ROC Ministry of National Defense (MND) reported the coordinated presence of 30 People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) aircraft and nine People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) vessels operating around the island, with a significant share of aircraft entering Taiwan's northern, central, and southwestern Air Defense Identification Zone ['PLA activities' 2024, 3 April]. Data released by Taiwan's MND and analysed by external observers indicate that 2024 marked a record year in terms of the frequency and regularity of PLA aircraft crossings of the Taiwan Strait median line [Ma & Tang 2025, 6 July].

Crucially, this increase did not correspond to a proportional rise in the total number of aircraft sorties detected around Taiwan, suggesting that the intensification of activity was driven less by an expansion of force deployment than by a deliberate reallocation of existing assets toward more forward and politically sensitive operating patterns. The sharp rise in the proportion of sorties crossing the median line—from 36.1 per cent in 2023 to 60.1 per cent in 2024 [Ma & Tang 2025, 6 July]—points to an operational environment characterised by persistent daily pressure rather than sporadic high-intensity surges. From a military perspective, this pattern implies that the PLA Eastern Theater Command Air Force was operating close to its maximum peacetime capacity throughout 2024. The absence of a significant increase in large-scale peak incursion periods suggests structural constraints related to command and control, logistics, and maintenance, which limit the frequency with which high-intensity operations can be sustained. At the same time, the growing regularity of median-line crossings enhanced training realism by forcing repeated responses from the ROC Air Force, embedding attrition into routine interaction rather than episodic confrontation.

### *3.2. Encirclement Narratives and the Routinisation of Multidomain Coercion*

Within this evolving operational context, references to encirclement or constriction—often captured through the metaphor of an «anaconda strategy» in international media reporting and policy commentary—function primarily as narrative devices rather than as indicators of a unified or formally articulated operational blueprint [Singh 2025, p. 23; *The Economist* 2024, 3 October]. Such language has at times been echoed within Taiwanese political and military discourse—especially by admiral Tang Hua—not as a doctrinal construct, but as a descriptive shorthand used to convey the cumulative and spatially pervasive nature of pressure in the Strait [CNA 2024d]. This shift is relatively recent, insofar as until a few years ago Taiwan's self-positioning vis-à-vis Chinese pressure was articulated primarily in diplomatic terms—most notably with reference to international representation and exclusion—

rather than framed as a sustained and existential security condition.

From 2024 onward, Taiwan increasingly framed Chinese pressure in the Strait as a permanent and systemic security condition. This marked a departure from earlier patterns of official discourse, in which expressions of concern were largely confined to episodes of diplomatic exclusion or challenges to international representation, rather than to the sustained articulation of the Strait itself as a continuous arena of security vulnerability. In this sense, encirclement narratives contributed to the securitisation of daily military activity by translating routinised coercion into a communicable threat perception, without fundamentally redefining Taiwan's strategic posture or doctrinal assumptions.

The execution of the *Joint Sword–2024A* drills on 23–24 May 2024 constituted a further step in the PLA's refinement of multidomain coercion [ICG 2024, 26 September]. Presented by Chinese authorities as a response to President Lai Ching-te's inauguration speech, the exercises were announced with minimal advance notice and involved coordinated activities by multiple PLA services alongside the China Coast Guard (CCG) [Sela 2025, 1 April]. Official statements indicated a focus on joint combat readiness patrols and precision strike scenarios, while avoiding live-fire escalation in the immediate vicinity of the island [MNDPRC 2024a]. A distinctive feature of *Joint Sword–2024A* was its geographic scope, which extended beyond Taiwan's main island to include several outlying territories—notably Kinmen, Matsu, Wuqiu, and Dongyin [MNDPRC 2024b]. This spatial configuration foregrounded scenarios centred on partial encirclement, selective pressure, and jurisdictional contestation short of full-scale invasion. The concurrent involvement of the CCG in activities framed as «law enforcement» [ICG 2024, 26 September] further illustrated the coordinated use of military and quasi-military instruments.

This hybrid model was subsequently operationalised on 2 July 2024 with the interception of the Taiwanese vessel *Tachinman 88* near Kinmen, reinforcing the gradual normalisation of coercive presence within Taiwan's restricted waters [van der Wees 2026, 5 January]. The drills also unfolded amid heightened international naval activity in adjacent waters, contributing to an increasingly dense operational environment in which PLA exercises took place alongside, though not directly linked to, the presence of US and allied naval assets. In 2025, PLA activity further evolved toward the deliberate synchronisation of military pressure with moments of heightened political sensitivity. Explicitly punitive drills conducted on 1 April 2025 reinforced the role of exercises as instruments of calibrated communication rather than purely military preparation. The symbolic dimension of power projection was further amplified on 13 September 2025 with the first transit of the aircraft carrier *Fujian* through the Taiwan Strait. Although officially

framed as a training mission [XHW 2025a], the passage of China's most advanced carrier functioned as a high-visibility demonstration of the PLAN's expanding capacity to operate within one of the region's most politically sensitive waterways.

The biennium culminated in the live-fire drills known as *Justice Mission 2025*, conducted on 29–30 December 2025. The adoption of an explicit, mission-oriented new codename marked a qualitative shift in signalling practices [ISW 2026, 2 January], contributing to the further consolidation of what may be described as the institutionalisation of «political punctuation» [van der Wees 2026, 5 January]. In contrast to earlier exercises primarily framed as situational or reactive responses, *Justice Mission 2025* displayed a more autonomous and programmatic logic, suggesting that named drills had become an established component of a stabilised repertoire of coercive communication aimed at asserting sovereignty claims and shaping the behaviour of external actors—most notably the United States and Japan—during periods of perceived regional or internal instability [Reed, Connell & Walberg 2026].

From an operational standpoint, the exercise was characterised by a markedly compressed timeline and by extremely limited advance notification, with activities unfolding rapidly across air, maritime, missile, and paramilitary domains. Chinese state media portrayed *Justice Mission 2025* as a «cold start» or snap exercise, emphasising its sudden onset and reinforcing an image of operational unpredictability [XHW 2025b]. This portrayal was partially at odds with information released by Taiwan's MND, which indicated that intelligence assets had detected irregular activity and potential preparatory movements several days prior to the official announcement of the drills [MNA 2025, 29 December]. The divergence between these narratives suggests that claims of spontaneity functioned less as a reflection of actual operational planning than as an element of strategic messaging, designed to amplify uncertainty and psychological pressure within an already saturated security environment.

In substantive terms, *Justice Mission 2025* both followed and expanded upon the thematic and operational patterns established in the post-2022 exercise cycle, while simultaneously introducing a series of notable firsts. These included the closest live-fire activity to Taiwan recorded to date, the first deployment of a Type 075 amphibious assault ship in a joint exercise conducted around the island [Tang 2026, 9 January], and an increased emphasis on psychological warfare and political communication alongside conventional manoeuvres [XHW 2025c]. The sequencing of activities—encompassing air superiority operations, maritime interdiction, coordinated long-range rocket launches, and sustained China Coast Guard «law enforcement» patrols—reinforced the hybrid character of the exercise. As

with earlier drills, *Justice Mission 2025* thus fulfilled a dual function: providing operational experience to PLA and associated forces, while simultaneously operating as a calibrated signalling instrument directed both inward, toward Taiwan, and outward, toward external stakeholders, within a broader framework of routinised coercion.

### 3.3. *Grey-Zone Vulnerabilities and Infrastructural Interdiction*

Alongside these conventional displays of force, the PRC intensified grey-zone operations targeting Taiwan's critical infrastructure. On 25 February 2025, the Taiwan–Penghu No. 3 submarine communications cable was severed [Ocon & Walberg 2025, 4 June]. The subsequent detention of a Togolese-flagged vessel with a Chinese crew operating in the vicinity underscored both Taiwan's vulnerability to non-kinetic interdiction and the strategic utility of plausible deniability in contemporary maritime coercion.

Taken together, developments during the 2024–2025 period confirm a shift toward a condition of continuous, multidomain pressure in the Taiwan Strait. Military drills increasingly functioned not merely as episodic demonstrations of capability, but as a permanent communicative layer of the «new normal», within which routine activity and contingency were deliberately blurred [Roctus 2025]. Beyond their immediate operational effects, these practices also reflect a broader transformation under Xi Jinping, whereby the PLA has moved from a background instrument of long-term coercive patience to a central and overt mechanism of pressure, increasingly positioned as the primary tool through which Beijing seeks to force a resolution of the Taiwan question [Campagnola 2024].

## 4. *Political Stress, External Exposure, and Strategic Adjustment (2024–2025)*

### 4.1. *Taiwan–United States Relations in an Era of Uncertainty: Ambiguity, Transactionalism, and Asymmetric Bargaining*

Across 2024–2025, relations between Taipei and Washington were shaped by the interaction of sustained external pressure, domestic political constraint in Taiwan, and the return of a polarised US presidency following Donald Trump's reassumption of office on 20 January 2025. The November 2024 US presidential election thus constituted a structural turning point within the biennium, redefining the parameters of Taiwan's most consequential external relationship.

From Taipei's perspective, the early phase of the Trump II administration was marked by efforts to secure communication channels with the new White House while avoiding missteps in an increasingly personalised decision-making environment. Several analysts suggested that this caution may have limited Taiwan's visibility at the presidential level, noting that «President Lai may have played his cards too safe when it comes to making an impression on President Donald Trump» [Hsieh 2025a, 8 January]. While necessarily speculative, such assessments reflected broader concern over the difficulty of signalling within an administration where perception and personal rapport appeared unusually salient. Uncertainty was reinforced by presidential rhetoric. In February 2025, President Trump declined to clarify whether the United States would intervene militarily in the event of a Chinese attack on Taiwan, preferring not to «comment on that» [Hunnicut 2025, 27 February]. Although formally consistent with strategic ambiguity, the blunt delivery generated unease among analysts who feared deterrence could be weakened by perceived indifference rather than calibrated restraint. At the same time, this ambiguity contrasted with repeated reassurances from senior administration officials. The Secretary of State and other representatives of the foreign policy apparatus consistently reaffirmed opposition to unilateral changes to the status quo and commitments under the Taiwan Relations Act. Similar language was reiterated in October 2025 ahead of renewed diplomatic engagement with Beijing [US Department of State 2025, 25 October], reinforcing the impression that reassurance and uncertainty were being produced simultaneously. The coexistence of presidential reticence and bureaucratic continuity thus became a defining feature of Trump II, complicating Taipei's strategic calculus.

Economic policy further accentuated this pattern. The imposition of steep US tariffs on Taiwanese exports in April 2025—initially set at 32 per cent [XZY 2025]—introduced an unexpected source of strain into a relationship Taipei had framed as grounded in shared strategic interests.<sup>6</sup> Although tariffs were subsequently reduced to 20 per cent and later to 15 per cent following substantial Taiwanese investment commitments in the US semiconductor sector [US Department of Commerce 2026, 15 January], the episode illustrated the increasingly transactional logic structuring bilateral economic relations [Whelan & Ramkumar 2026, 2 February; Sacks & Segal 2025, 4 March]. Major new investments by TSMC reinforced Taiwan's relevance within US industrial policy but also highlighted Taipei's constrained room for manoeuvre under asymmetric bargaining conditions,

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<sup>6</sup> For a detailed assessment of the tariffs imposed by the United States on Taiwan, their subsequent reduction, and, above all, the impact of these measures on Taiwanese public opinion and levels of trust in the United States as an ally, see Freedman [2025, 11 July].

especially as key US allies such as Japan and South Korea faced comparatively lighter tariff burdens. At the same time, the Lai administration signalled a noticeable recalibration of the domestic agenda that had characterised the Tsai Ing-wen years, particularly on issues related to gender politics.<sup>7</sup> This shift reflected not only Lai's own political orientation but also an effort to maintain closer political alignment with Washington under the Trump administration.

In contrast to executive-level ambiguity, the US Congress maintained a consistently assertive and bipartisan posture on Taiwan throughout 2025. Legislative initiatives such as the Porcupine Act, the Taiwan Assurance Implementation Act, and Taiwan-related provisions in the FY2026 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) reflected a growing consensus in favour of strengthening Taiwan's deterrent capabilities and institutional ties with Washington. President Trump's reluctant signature of the NDAA, accompanied by reservations over constraints on executive authority, further underscored institutional tension between congressional codification of support and presidential preference for flexibility. Taipei responded by emphasising strategic responsibility. In November 2025, President Lai announced a US\$40 billion supplementary defence budget extending through 2033 [OPROC 2025], aimed at accelerating arms acquisitions, enhancing asymmetric capabilities, and raising defence spending toward 5 per cent of GDP. While welcomed by US officials, the initiative encountered domestic political resistance, illustrating how external uncertainty fed back into Taiwan's internal constraints and reinforced patterns of governance under constraint.

At the same time, uncertainty surrounding the durability of US security commitments—partly shaped by the Trump administration's approach to the war in Ukraine—contributed to a more cautious strategic environment. While the Biden administration's response to the Russian invasion has demonstrated how coordinated military, economic and diplomatic measures can impose extremely high costs on a revisionist power [Fravel 2023], a lesson not lost on Beijing when considering the implications of a potential conflict over Taiwan. At the same time, Washington's evolving political posture has highlighted possible vulnerabilities in the perceived reliability of US commitments [Yang 2025, 14 February]. This dynamic carries direct implications for deterrence calculations in the Taiwan Strait.

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<sup>7</sup> The most visible example was probably the case of boxer Lin Yu-ting during the 2024 Olympics controversy. Presidential support from Lai appeared limited and carefully circumscribed, addressed primarily to the domestic audience through messages on social media and local Chinese-language radio [Ouyang 2024, 2 August], without a clear attempt to project the issue internationally.

#### *4.2. Deterrence without Guarantees: Strategic Documents, Congressional Activism, and Policy Recalibration*

These dynamics were also reflected in US strategic documents. The National Defense Strategy did not explicitly mention Taiwan, yet emphasised the need for «a strong denial of defense along the First Island Chain» [US Department of Defense 2026, p. 4], implicitly situating the island within a broader regional deterrence architecture [Lin & Hart 2026, 26 January]. The National Security Strategy (NSS) 2025 adopted more explicit language, identifying the deterrence of a conflict over Taiwan as a priority while committing to «not support any unilateral change to the status quo in the Taiwan Strait» [White House 2025, November, p. 23]. The shift from earlier formulations opposing such changes did not amount to a doctrinal rupture [Termine & Ercolani 2022], but rather reflected continuity in strategic intent combined with renewed emphasis on flexibility and ambiguity [Lee 2026, 22 January]. The NSS also reiterated the strategic importance of Taiwan's semiconductor industry for US industrial resilience and supply-chain security, an element already present—albeit with different nuances—in previous editions of US strategic guidance. This orientation was further underscored by the NSS's affirmation that «while in our dealings with Taiwan and Australia we maintain our determined rhetoric on increased defense spending» [White House 2025, November, p. 24], signalling a preference for capability-based deterrence over declaratory guarantees. In this sense, already mentioned recently adopted legislative measures, rather than redefining US policy, functioned as instruments for consolidating Taiwan's deterrent posture by recalibrating the frameworks governing arms transfers and defence cooperation. By streamlining procurement procedures, elevating Taiwan's status within export-control and security-assistance regimes, and facilitating more rapid access to asymmetric capabilities, these measures enhanced material readiness and deepened institutional embedding within US security planning, while preserving a high degree of executive discretion.

More broadly, the debate reflects the potential risks associated with the growing polarization of U.S. foreign policy discussions [Nachman 2025]. Historically, the Taiwan issue has benefited from a relatively stable bipartisan consensus in Washington [Wang 2024], which has long represented one of the structural pillars of U.S. policy toward the island and its role within the regional security architecture. A visible partisan fracture on Taiwan would therefore constitute an unprecedented development in the history of U.S.–Taiwan relations. At present, however, polarisation appears to influence the surrounding political discourse more than the substance of policy itself. While rhetorical signals occasionally reflect the broader climate

of domestic contestation, the institutional and strategic framework of U.S. support for Taiwan has remained largely unchanged, and the administration appears to maintain a consistent securitising posture toward Taiwan and the stability of cross-strait relations [Hanson & Keyes 2024].

## 5. *Conclusions*

Over the course of 2024–2025, Taiwan’s political system exhibited the cumulative effects of divided government, as a weakened presidency confronted sustained legislative resistance, constitutional contestation, and the limits of recall politics. In parallel, greater uncertainty and transactional tendencies in US policy rendered long-standing practices of symbolic management more fragile than in earlier periods. Even so, Taiwan’s expanding external exposure did not culminate in diplomatic marginalisation. On the contrary, sustained support from Japan—whose foreign and security policy under Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi has pivoted toward a proactive and pragmatic posture [Jain 2025]—and the increasing density of parliamentary and governmental delegations from European states [Šimalčík et al. 2025, pp. 18–20] signalled a broader, if still predominantly political and diplomatic, expansion of Taiwan’s international space. At the same time, the Lai administration continued to advance defence planning despite institutional blockage, including through the proposal of a record-scale 2025 defence budget amounting to NT\$647 billion [Reuters 2024b, 22 August]. Economically, Taiwan’s performance remained striking. Growth accelerated on the back of AI-driven export demand, with official forecasts repeatedly revised upward through late 2025 [Hille 2025, 28 November] and the 2025 outturn later assessed at 8.6 per cent, the fastest pace in fifteen years [Chan 2026, 30 January].

Overall, the period under review points to a cross-Strait environment defined by heightened coercive pressure and greater uncertainty in US signalling, but also by a more assertive—though not overtly confrontational—Taiwanese diplomacy vis-à-vis Europe and other like-minded partners, alongside sustained economic dynamism. Rather than producing a decisive realignment, these dynamics contributed to the reproduction of constraint, stabilising Taiwan’s adaptive capacity while leaving the island’s structural position within the regional order fundamentally unchanged. At the same time, both Taipei’s international projection and elements of its domestic policy agenda appear increasingly calibrated to evolving relations with Washington and to the emerging strategic pressure in the Taiwan Strait.

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