Have Taiwan's Identity Politics Outgrown the One China Myth?

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Taiwan is like no other place on Earth. That's not a line from a promotional video or tourist brochure. It's a simple fact of history, politics and international relations. Taiwan, with its population of nearly 24 million, is a vibrant liberal democracy and a major node in global value chains. Without components designed in Taiwan and produced in Taiwanese-managed factories in China and Southeast Asia, many of the devices people use every day simply wouldn't work. Taiwan is an indispensable part of 21st-century life.

But it is not a member of the United Nations and only has diplomatic relations with a motley collection of mostly poor countries that rely on it for foreign aid. The country has no official military alliances, though the United States Congress statutorily required Washington to sell Taipei the weapons it needs for self-defense after the U.S formally switched its diplomatic recognition to the People's Republic of China in 1979. Taiwan is excluded from all of the world's major intergovernmental organizations or relegated to "observer" status. Many outsiders and even international relations experts simply assume that the country will ultimately reintegrate with China.

So when, on Dec. 2, Donald Trump, then the U.S. president-elect, took a congratulatory phone call from Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen, it sparked a firestorm of controversy. If the response from China was somewhat cautious and measured in tone, the reaction from Western experts bordered on apoplectic. England's Daily Express newspaper suggested that China would invade Taiwan before Trump's Jan. 20 inauguration. The Australian journalist John Pilger reiterated his warnings of a potential nuclear war between China and the United States, and Australia's leading security think tank ran a piece that openly questioned whether Canberra should maintain its alliance with Washington.

In response, Trump questioned the meaning and wisdom of America's long-standing "One China" policy, which recognizes only one government as the government of China. Before 1979, Washington considered that government to be the one in Taipei; since, it has been the one in Beijing. And One China is not just a U.S. policy; at China's—and, until 1979, Taiwan's—insistence, every country in the world must recognize only one government of China. No country has diplomatic relations with both.

The Tsai-Trump phone call seems to have been a one-off stunt, and a second call is apparently not in the cards. Soon after taking office, Trump reiterated the One China policy, though it is still not clearly defined. The official State Department position is that the U.S. does not support Taiwanese independence, but it doesn't oppose it, either. Washington also "acknowledges" the Chinese opposition to Taiwan's autonomy, again without explicitly supporting it.

So just what does One China mean? After all, the U.S. only recognizes one Canada, one Mexico and one government of every other country in the world. Why should things be any different for China? Why have a One China policy at all?

Today, the only real answer is that China insists on it. Beijing refuses to have diplomatic relations with any nation that recognizes the government in Taipei, and will not be a member of any international organization that accredits the Taiwanese state. China is adamantly opposed to any suggestion of sovereignty for the island of Taiwan—an unequivocal position with a long backstory that stretches back to the fall of the Ming Dynasty.

The controversy didn't begin in 1949 with the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) by Chinese Communist leader Mao Zedong and the flight to Taiwan of Chiang Kai-shek's defeated nationalists. It began in 1644, when the Qing dynasty was born.

The View From Beijing

Taiwan is a mountainous island situated some 100 to 125 miles off the coast of China's Fujian province. The two Chinese characters used to represent Taiwan mean "terrace bay," but the actual etymology is more complicated, and not fully settled. The Pescadores islands off the western coast of Taiwan have historically been considered part of the country as well.

Taiwan also controls the islands of Kinmen and Matsu near the Fujian coast and Taiping in the South China Sea. Though their current status has inevitably been caught up in arguments over Taiwan, Kinmen and Matsu were historically part of Fujian province. Taiping has no civilian population and is not recognized as an island at all under international provisions.

The indigenous population of Taiwan consists of Austronesian tribes who are linguistically and culturally related to other Pacific Islander groups like Melanesians, Polynesians and the indigenous peoples of Indonesia. Members of the 16 recognized indigenous tribes of Taiwan make up roughly 2 to 3 percent of the population, or about 540,000 people. Like most indigenous peoples, they have long faced discrimination and marginalization and now constitute a seriously disadvantaged minority within Taiwanese society.

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Confusingly, the term "Taiwanese" does not refer to these indigenous people, but to the pre-1895 Chinese settlers of the island, who might more accurately be described as its first wave of modern colonists. In the early 1600s, Chinese settlers began to arrive from Fujian province across the Taiwan Strait, clearing land and displacing indigenous tribes in much the same way as English settlers were displacing

indigenous tribes in North America. The Chinese in Taiwan reached an estimated population of 200,000 by the late 1600s. Their descendants, supplemented by more-recent arrivals from Fujian province, make up the core of the island's majority "Taiwanese" ethnic group.
Mixed in with the mainly Fujianese settlers were refugees from the wars of the Ming-Qing transition, beginning with the 1644 overthrow of the native Han Chinese Ming Dynasty by the Manchurian Qing Dynasty. In a foreshadowing of China's 20th-century civil war, the retreating Ming forces ultimately fled to Taiwan, where they held out for 40 more years. The Qing finally subdued the Ming remnants on Taiwan in 1683. For the next 200 years—until 1895—Taiwan was nominally part of the Chinese Empire ruled by the Qing Dynasty.

The Chinese diplomatic system that once prevailed in East Asia had a more fluid concept of sovereignty than that recognized in the West, resulting in later disputes over whether Taiwan was historically part of China. Whatever the reality on the ground, it is a matter of diplomatic record that other countries considered Taiwan a possession of China, as reflected in several of the "unequal treaties" of the 19th century. For example, in the Treaties of Tientsin that ended the Second Opium War in 1860, China ceded trading rights on Taiwan to British, French and American ships.

If China's 19th-century sovereignty over Taiwan was ever in doubt, it was settled by the punitive Treaty of Shimonoseki that Japan imposed on China at the end of the 1894-1895 Sino-Japanese War. In the treaty, China ceded to Japan three territories: part of Liaoning province on the mainland, the island of Taiwan and the Pescadores. An indemnity was later substituted for the first of these, but in May 1895, Japanese troops arrived to take possession of Taiwan.

There was significant organized local Taiwanese resistance to the Japanese occupation, culminating in the proclamation of an independent Republic of Formosa. This is sometimes used to buttress claims that Taiwan was not China's to cede—though it was clear that Japan and other countries believed it was. If the short-lived opposition movement in 1895 constituted an independent state, it was, like today's Taiwan, one that was not recognized by the rest of the world. Japan ruled Taiwan as a colony for the next 50 years, belatedly attempting to integrate it into the home islands in 1945 in a vain bid to retain it after the war.

Taiwan and the Pescadores were restored to Chinese rule at the end of World War II in line with allied commitments made at the 1943 Cairo Conference. The handover from Japanese to Chinese civil authority occurred on Oct. 25, 1945, following Japan's surrender in World War II. Whatever its convoluted and sometimes troubled history, there is no doubt that Taiwan became part of China on that day. The maintenance of some form of nominally Chinese sovereignty over the island has been continuous ever since.

On the basis of this lineage, the People's Republic of China—as the only China recognized by the United Nations and most of the world—claims Taiwan as its own. At the same time, the state that currently governs the island is also a lineal descendant of the state that once ruled all of China, but it is not China—and no longer claims the right to rule it.

In any case, it is increasingly anachronistic to call it by its constitutional name, the Republic of China. It is, for nearly all practical purposes, Taiwan.

Taiwan as Taiwan

Constitutionally speaking, the state of Taiwan is defined as the Republic of China (ROC), though the constitution was belatedly updated in 1992 to recognize the reality that Taipei governs only the "free area" of Taiwan, Kinmen and Matsu, not the entirety of China. Gone is the conceit that the Chinese mainland is "in rebellion" and will soon be returned to ROC control. In its official rhetoric, Taiwan retains the legal name of the Republic of China, but little else; its internet domain is .tw, and its tourist brochures are emblazoned "Taiwan: The Heart of Asia."

The ROC government, having lost the Chinese Civil War, retreated from the mainland to Taipei in December 1949. Then-President Chiang Kai-shek and his nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) party were not necessarily welcome on the island. Taiwan had only recently been restored to Chinese rule, and Chiang had tightly squeezed the island's fragile economy to generate resources for the war. In 1947, there had been major unrest over KMT rule; in the infamous 228 Incident on February 28, protests against police brutality were met with severe repression that killed around 10,000 mostly unarmed civilians. The event marked the beginning of the KMT's decades-long campaign of suppressing political dissent through martial law, known as the White Terror.

Taiwan's KMT government finally lifted martial law in 1987 and made the transition to democracy in 1992. The first opposition candidate to win the presidency, Chen Shui-bian of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), took office in 2000 and governed until 2008, when Ma Ying-jeou reclaimed the presidency for the KMT. In 2016, a DPP leader, Tsai Ing-wen, won the presidency for the second time, and for the first time gained a majority in Taiwan's parliament, the Legislative Yuan. Taiwan is now universally applauded as a stable, competitive democracy with guaranteed freedoms and a robust civil society. The KMT, once a Leninist ruling party cut from the same cloth as the Communist Party of China (CPC) across the strait, is now the loyal democratic opposition.
Nonetheless, symbols of the former KMT party-state abound, beginning with Taiwan's ROC flag, which is derived from the KMT's own. Taiwan's ceremonial center is dominated by the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall, which celebrates the life and rule of a dictator viewed by some as the father of the country but by others as a murderous oppressor; there is now a movement to remove Chiang from his positions of honor. Another prestigious Taipei institution, the National Chengchi University (NCCU), began as the KMT party school and is still closely associated with the party. Student protests against lyrics extoling the KMT in the university anthem have highlighted similar historical associations between the party and many Taipei-area schools.

It's no coincidence that these institutions are concentrated in Taipei. As the provincial capital, Taipei was the natural place for Chiang to locate his government-in-exile in 1949. But the role of Taipei, and particularly suburban Taipei, in the KMT's political influence runs much deeper than that. In the wake of the Communist victory in the Chinese Civil War, an estimated 2 million people fled from the mainland to

Taiwan, whose existing population was around 6 million. Many of these new arrivals ended up in what was at the time a sleepy, provincial capital: Taipei.

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Between the censuses of 1946 and 1968, Taipei's population grew from 272,000 to 1.6 million. Any visitor to the eastern sprawl of central Taipei can't help but notice the endless blocks of utilitarian 1950s mixed-use residential buildings with small stores and workshops on the ground floor. These were built to house the hundreds of thousands of mainlanders flooding Taipei, many of them demobilized soldiers and their families. Though "old" Taipei institutions like the National Taiwan University—the former Japanese colonial university—had been centers of resistance to KMT rule, they were soon supplemented by "new" Republic of China institutions founded to serve Taipei's burgeoning population.
The differences between pre-1945 "Taiwan" institutions and post-1945 "ROC" institutions reflected how, for decades, Taiwan's various communities understood their own identities. To be Chinese meant to associate with the ROC and ultimately with the KMT, while to be Taiwanese meant to associate with local civil society and, in extremis, with the former Japanese occupation. Throughout the period of martial law from 1949 to 1987 and well into the first decades of democracy, official patriotism meant identifying with Taiwan as the ROC, not with Taiwan as Taiwan. Even today, the main fault line between the KMT and the DPP is one of identity.

The first democratically elected president of Taiwan, Lee Teng-hui, embodies that split. Catapulted to office in 1988 by the death of Chiang Kai-shek's son, under whom he served as vice president, Lee was a native Taiwanese technocrat, not a KMT politician with a strong base in the party-state. He had served in the Japanese army toward the end of World War II as a volunteer officer, not a draftee, and spoke Japanese fluently. His career brought him into the KMT at a time when all other political parties were banned, but after retiring in 2000 he left to found a new pro-independence party, the Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU).

Since the emergence of the multiparty democracy that Lee helped foster, Taiwan's politics have been dominated by two broad coalitions, the pan-Blue coalition centered on the KMT and the pan-Green coalition centered on the DPP. Lee's TSU is a member of the latter, and Lee is widely considered a mentor to Taiwan's current president, Tsai Ing-wen of the DPP. Like Lee, Tsai's family history is rooted in pre-war Taiwan. Both figures are "bensheng ren," or "provincials," as is most of the core leadership of the pan-Green coalition.

The central leadership of the KMT's pan-Blue coalition was historically "waisheng ren," or "mainlanders," but in the 21st century that term is increasingly anachronistic. Ma Ying-jeou, the most recent KMT president in office from 2008 to 2016, was born in Hong Kong to mainland refugees, and the last two party chairs have been Taiwan natives. The KMT may advocate closer cross-Strait relations and eventual reunification with the PRC, but it can no longer be caricatured as an authoritarian party of die-hard militarists intent on continuing the civil war. With the change in generations, history has moved on.

The "bensheng ren" of the pan-Green coalition are the natural advocates of Taiwanese independence, but in reality the dynamic isn't so simple. Tsai's DPP portrays itself as a pro-independence party, but officially maintains a strategic silence on the issue. She prefers to portray Taiwan as being independent already, using this stance to sidestep difficult and divisive debates that might tear apart her coalition. Hard-core pan-Green activists want a formal declaration of independence and a new constitution that replaces the name "Republic of China" with "Taiwan." More cautious mainstream voices prefer gradual change.

Things are even more complicated for the pan-Blue coalition. In a strange twist of fate, the once fiercely anti-communist KMT is now on relatively friendly terms with the Communist Party of China (CPC), which vilifies Tsai's more open and liberal DPP. The KMT and CPC even hold an annual joint forum to discuss cross-Strait issues. At the 2016 forum—the first after Tsai took office—the chair of the KMT actually met with Chinese President Xi Jinping; by contrast, China has shunned or closed down official communication channels with the DPP. In the annals of strange bedfellows, the blossoming romance between the KMT and the CPC ranks as one of the strangest.

Common Dreams?

What the KMT and the CPC have in common, of course, is a historical commitment to the reunification of China and Taiwan. But it's not clear how much either side is really committed to this goal. The KMT and the CPC both seem to have reconciled with the status quo just as much as with each other.

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The KMT has recently dropped all references to One China from its official party platform, opting instead for the much more modest goal of a "reaching a peace agreement" with the PRC. This has been a bitter pill for party stalwarts to swallow, but it reflects the simple reality that virtually no one in Taiwan wants to be governed

from Beijing—and there is no chance of China ever being ruled from Taipei. These days, the KMT stance on cross-Strait relations seems to boil down to a sensible "don't rock the boat" focus on business development.
China, too, seems satisfied with the current arrangements. Though Beijing routinely threatens to invade Taiwan if it ever declares "independence"—a term intentionally left undefined by both sides—it has done little to build the necessary military capacity to do so. China's massive naval construction program seems to be aimed at the development of prestige weapons like aircraft carriers, not the building of such workaday vessels as landing craft and supply ships. China could potentially pound Taiwan with rockets, but that would do little to bring the island back—on the contrary, it would permanently destroy any hope of eventual reunification, no matter how distant the prospect.

As a substitute for reunification, Beijing has embraced the so-called "1992 consensus": the live-and-let-live principle that has governed cross-Strait relations for the past quarter century. Tsai denies the existence of any explicit understanding and goes to great lengths never to utter the phrase. But she also avoids mentioning the independence issue, insisting that under her watch there will be no change in Taiwan's status. She has repeatedly pledged to maintain the "status quo" while declining to define just what that means. She knows that the DPP can only maintain a governing majority if it treads lightly on the very issue that defines the party: independence for Taiwan.

Despite this softening of the DPP's pro-independence rhetoric, China has ratcheted up its pressure on Taiwan since Tsai's May 2016 inauguration, using mainly economic tools. Tourist arrivals from China, a mainstay of the Taiwanese economy, have declined dramatically over the past year. China denies any official meddling in travel approvals, but the decline is almost certainly due to a combination of government pressure and negative state-media coverage of the new administration in Taipei. China is also exerting greater pressure on Taiwan's few diplomatic allies to switch recognition from Taipei to Beijing.

It is tempting to see Taiwan's declining trade with China as another sign of Chinese retribution for the DPP's less-accommodating approach to relations with Beijing. But considering that China's imports declined 5.5 percent across the board in 2016, there is little reason to believe that it is targeting Taiwan in particular. China's economy is slowing, taking with it the country's capacity to absorb Taiwanese investment and expertise.

If China generally doesn't bother to actively promote reunification, it's probably because leaders in Beijing have come to realize that it is never going to happen, even if they feel politically constrained to reiterate timeworn slogans about the territorial integrity of China. More than three-quarters of Taiwan's population was born after 1949, and more than 90 percent came of age on the island, making pre-1949 China the distant memory of a dying generation. Beijing may have a reasonable legal case to sovereignty over the physical island of Taiwan, but it has little moral claim over its current inhabitants.

What's more, the people of Taiwan are increasingly turning their backs on China. According to annual surveys conducted by the NCCU, support for immediate

reunification is less than 2 percent, and for gradual reunification just 8.5 percent, compared to a total pro-unification figure of 22 percent in 1996. The proportion of the population identifying as "Chinese" has fallen even more steeply, from around one-quarter in the early 1990s to 3.4 percent today.

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The big shift over the past 25 years has been in the proportion of Taiwan's population that defines itself as being exclusively Taiwanese—rising from under 20 percent in 1992 to above 50 percent in 2009. It hovers around 60 percent today. It's no wonder, then, that the KMT has stopped pushing reunification and started to diversify its message. Given that its very name means "nationalist party," it would be doomed to demographic oblivion if voters continued to construe the nation in the party's name to be China.
Nowhere is the battle over Taiwan's identity fought more bitterly than in the writing of history textbooks. In 2015, Ma Ying-jeou's outgoing administration rushed through a major revision of the country's history and civics textbooks, anticipating that the KMT was almost certain to lose its grip on power in the looming 2016 elections. The changes were widely perceivedas intended to foster a sense that Taiwan's roots were in China, and that the KMT was the peaceful guardian of that noble heritage.

One year later, the DPP government reversed the textbook rewrite on its first full day in office. Four students who had led protests against the 2015 reforms have been appointed to a panel that will now oversee a DPP-led textbook revision. The new books should be ready by the end of the decade, just in time for the next national elections in 2020.

Whatever the academic merits of the warring textbook plans, the competition itself illustrates the degree to which national identity is politicized in Taiwan. Despite serious problems like wage stagnation, youth unemployment, air pollution, nuclear-waste disposal and the funding of social services for an aging population, Taiwan's two major political parties remain mired in the conflict over identity. Perhaps as a result, the approval rating for the current DPP government comes in at just 35 percent, a minor improvement over the KMT before it, which left office with around 20 percent popularity. Like their peers throughout the democratic world, Taiwan's voters seem to be increasingly dissatisfied with the electoral choices on offer.

It's the Economy, Stupid

Taiwan is a moderately prosperous country with a GDP per capita of around $22,000—richer than Portugal, but poorer than Spain. The cost of living is relatively

low; GDP per capita rises to $48,000 when measured on a purchasing power parity basis. Taiwan's economy is no longer growing at "Asian Tiger" rates, but the expected 2 percent growth rate for 2017 represents a solid performance, especially when compared to many other developed countries. So why are voters so dissatisfied?

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In Taiwan, as in so many other developed countries, the economy may be growing but wages are not. While its 12 percent youth unemployment rate might seem low by European standards today, it is high compared to Taiwan's own historical experience and has driven many to relocate to China to find work. No one knows how many have gone, though unsourced estimates indicate more than 1 million, or 10 percent of the labor force. Taiwanese who relocate to China to make serious money are called "taishang"—"Taiwan businesspeople"—but anecdotes suggest that many others are ordinary young workers, especially in the service sector.
The fact that so many Taiwanese rely on China for jobs creates a high level of economic dependence—and uncertainty. In the Western imagination, cross-Strait relations are all about aircraft carriers and invasion fleets. But in Taiwan, the issues are much more down to earth. Bad relations with China threaten people's livelihoods, but dependence on Beijing limits Taipei's policy options. Nothing highlights this conundrum better than the failed 2013 Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA) and the 2014 student protests that sank it.

The CSSTA was one of two projected follow-ups to the landmark 2010 Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement that regularized and liberalized trade between China and Taiwan. The CSSTA would have set specific terms governing trade in services; the other, now-abandoned follow-up would have done the same for goods. The KMT government's heavy-handed attempt to ram the CSSTA through Taiwan's parliament sparked protests and a student occupation, dubbed the Sunflower Movement, that lasted 24 days.

On its surface, the student movement might seem an oddly passionate response to a legislative maneuver being used to force a vote on a highly technical economic treaty. But the pressures that prompted it were much more visceral than political. At first glance, the CSSTA actually seems to be more favorable to Taiwan than to China, prompting fears that it was a kind of Trojan horse meant to make Taiwan ever more dependent on access to China's economy. The Sunflower Movement may be the only example in history of people protesting a trade agreement on the grounds that it would generate too much investment and too many jobs.

Those jobs will now have to come from somewhere else. In a probably vain attempt to find them, the Tsai regime has fallen back on the perennial favorite of pan-Green

politics: the Go South strategy, in which Taiwanese politicians seeking to reduce the role of China in Taiwan's economy repeatedly look to Southeast Asia for economic partnerships. Lee Teng-hui did it in the 1990s, Chen Shui-bian did it in the 2000s, and Tsai Ing-wen is trying it again today.

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There is some evidence that economic ties with Southeast Asia, particularly Vietnam, are expanding as those with China stall. But Southeast Asian markets are simply too small—and Southeast Asian countries too poor—to replace China as the main outlet for Taiwan's investment and exports. And Taiwan is not the only country moving south: Japanese, Korean and Western firms are also diversifying out of China, attracted by low wages and compliant governments in Southeast Asia. Taiwan may even be at a disadvantage in this crowded space: In 2014, anti-Chinese mobs in Vietnam attacked Taiwanese factories, apparently believing them to be Chinese.
Taiwan, South Korea and Japan all have fraught economic and political relationships with China. In each case the reasons are different, but the end result is the same. The challenges that Taiwan faces across the Strait are very real, but are not significantly larger than those faced by Japan and South Korea. Taiwan's economy is in better shape than Japan's, and its security situation is better than South Korea's. There is no denying the difficulty of Taiwan's position vis-a-vis China, but Taipei is hardly unique in having to learn how to handle a larger and sometimes overbearing neighbor. Countries around the world face similar challenges, and Taiwan, with its high-tech economy and educated population, is as well-equipped to handle them as anyone else.

Facts on the Ground—and in the Sea

What is unique about Taiwan, of course, is its uncertain status as a de facto but unrecognized state. There's no point in questioning Taiwan's statehood: It has a fully elaborated, multilevel governing bureaucracy that collects taxes, pays pensions, maintains armed forces and enforces civil order. In short, Taiwan is decisively a state and a country; the only question is what country it is.

From a constitutional standpoint, Taiwan maintains the myth that it is the Republic of China. No one really believes this anymore, not even the KMT. The DPP talks about self-determination for Taiwan, but in office it has done little to make that a reality. Though international observers relentlessly stoke fears of a cross-Strait war, there are no signs of any preparations for conflict on either side. An actual shooting battle between China and Taiwan would be economically disastrous and militarily inconclusive, and both sides know it. Even such an unlikely scenario as a Chinese occupation of Kinmen, a Taiwanese territory within swimming distance of the

mainland city of Xiamen, would hardly cause World War III. And there are no signs of any such scenario, anyway.

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Instead both sides embrace different versions of a narrative that condemns them to the status quo. Even Tsai's insistence that Taiwan does not need to declare its independence because it is already the independent Republic of China is a different way of saying the same thing.
Beijing's bullying behavior toward Taiwan can only be described as unjust. Were China a country of ordinary size and influence, it would not be able to dissuade other countries from maintaining normal diplomatic relations with Taiwan. But China is big, and its rhetorical commitment to reunification is nothing short of talismanic. For China, reunification is like using the word "communist" to describe the Communist Party of China. It may no longer have any practical meaning, but those involved are too invested in the charade to ever willingly give it up.

The only hope Taiwan has for becoming a normal country is eventual regime change in Beijing, and the most important thing it can do to prepare for that possibility is to embrace its identity as Taiwan. Taiwanese, of both the "Blue" and "Green" camps, should drop the pretense that their claims have centuries-old historical roots. The reality is that Taiwan was born out of the messy events of 1949 and came of age during the transition to democracy in the 1990s. It is now a mature, if unfairly marginalized, member of the international democratic community.

Taiwan's route forward may be more difficult than it should be, but there is no turning back. A free and democratic future is the only future for Taiwan.

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