

Return to Strategic Ambiguity

US-Taiwan Relations under Trump 2.0



TSMC CEO C. C. Wei & Donald Trump, Photo: © ABACA Press, Imago.

In a Nutshell

Under Donald Trump's second term, relations between the US and Taiwan have returned to strategic ambiguity. While Trump's first administration was marked by deepened security and economic cooperation, his current policy places stronger emphasis on self-reliance and burden-sharing. Taiwan is increasingly urged to raise its defence spending in order to secure Washington's continued support.

These demands coincide with growing domestic polarisation. Tensions between the Democratic Progressive Party and the opposition, Kuomintang, hinder consistent defence planning, while delays in US arms deliveries amplify doubts about Washington's reliability.

At the same time, new economic dependencies are emerging. Trump's protectionist trade policies and the relocation of semiconductor and energy investments to the US heighten Taiwan's vulnerability. Dependence on US food imports also continues to grow.

In order to strengthen its resilience, Taiwan should diversify its external relations. Closer cooperation with Europe in defence technology, renewable energy, and capacity-building could help reduce structural dependencies and enhance long-term stability.

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Taiwan – a self-ruled archipelagic democracy that the Chinese Communist Party claims as its own despite never having controlled it – has developed longstanding and deep ties with the US and relies on Washington for international legitimacy, arms procurement, and diplomatic backing. A rare example of bipartisan unity, US–Taiwan relations have enjoyed strong support from Republicans and Democrats alike, as illustrated by the close cooperation under the first Trump administration and by the unprecedented expansion of military and security exchanges under the Biden administration. Nevertheless, Trump’s coercive diplomacy approach during his second term raises critical questions about the sustainability of US–Taiwan ties. As Washington “oscillates between isolationism and imperial overreach”,¹ to what extent will it maintain its deterrence efforts in order to preserve precarious peace around Taiwan?

Donald J. Trump’s attitude towards Taiwan appears to have evolved between his first and second terms in office. In his first term, Trump shifted US–Taiwan policy towards greater operational regularity and visibility. Washington unbundled and normalised the arms sales pipeline, approving record-setting packages totalling roughly 18.3 billion US dollars² paired with expanded senior-level exchanges and new cooperation in areas such as cyber and energy. Moreover, the US Navy publicised and routinised its transits through the Taiwan Strait, while the 2020 Economic Prosperity Partnership Dialogue³ created an additional channel for economic and technological coordination.⁴

In his second term, however, voices from the “restrainers” camp have gained further traction within the administration.⁵ The emerging line prioritises Taiwan’s own defence preparedness

over commitments to overt US military intervention in the event of a contingency, with Taiwan arguing that the risks of direct great-power confrontation would outweigh the potential benefits. This recalibration has been accompanied by sharper rhetoric about allied burden-sharing, with Trump pegging Taiwan as a freeloader that treats the US “no different than an insurance company”,⁶ which has triggered public reassurances from Taipei that it neither expects rescue nor shirks responsibility.⁷ Most recently, reports that Trump paused a tranche of US military assistance to Taiwan in order to prepare the ground for a potential trade arrangement with China further underscored his administration’s transactional outlook,⁸ even if arms sales to Taipei might still be booming. While Biden’s pronouncements of security guarantees indubitably shifted the discourse on Taiwan towards strategic clarity, the second Trump administration marks a return to strategic ambiguity.

Consequently, Taiwan finds itself in the midst of a multi-level crisis in which the nation is forced to put its resilience, deterrence ability, and international legitimacy to the test. Domestically, the inability of the two major parties to forge effective legislative-executive relations has exacerbated political polarisation and has affected Taipei’s ability to adopt appropriate budgetary expansions for defence-related items. These domestic cleavages were on display during the 2025 Great Recall Movement – a campaign aiming to recall opposition Kuomintang (KMT) legislators, accusing them of being too close to China and thus of undermining Taiwan’s democracy. In the cross-strait context, China continues to escalate its belligerence against Taiwan through several sub-threshold, grey-zone tactics, including the militarisation of its coast guard, sorties into Taiwan’s Air Defence

Identification Zone (ADIZ), and interference with the archipelagic democracy's critical maritime infrastructure.

Taipei relies heavily on US arms sales to bolster security given diplomatic constraints with other providers.

Last but not least, in the increasingly global system defined by material power and interests rather than by normative appeals, Taiwan needs to reevaluate its strategy of quasi-diplomatic engagements, which has rested on the notion of "like-mindedness" and the pursuit of shared values. The uncertainty in Taipei's dealings with Washington governed by Trump 2.0 may further exacerbate the gravity of these interlinked issues.

Pressure on Taiwan's defence spending: "NATO-Style" burden-sharing

Under Trump's renewed leadership, US officials have openly criticised Taiwan for not spending enough on its own defence. In March 2025, Trump's nominee for a top Pentagon policy post, Elbridge Colby – now the Under Secretary of War for Policy – admonished Taipei for investing "well below" three per cent of GDP on defence and presented an unprecedented call for a fourfold spending increase.⁹ Importantly, this demand represents not only a conceptual shift in burden sharing but also the commercial interests of the US, as Taipei relies almost exclusively on US arms sales to bolster its security capabilities, given its diplomatic constraints with other providers.

Due to the gravity of Trump 2.0's calls for increased defence spending, Taipei has responded by pledging budget hikes. President Lai Ching-Te announced a goal of exceeding 3 per cent of GDP for defence in 2025, and the government now plans to reach 3.32 per cent of GDP by 2026 – the first time this figure will have risen above 3 per cent in over a decade – with a long-term horizon

of increases of up to 5 per cent by 2030.¹⁰ However, even these increased figures fall short of Washington's expectations. Such parsimony has alarmed US policymakers, who insist that the US cannot show more urgency over Taiwan's defence than the nation itself can do. Indeed, Colby told Congress he was "profoundly disturbed" by indications that Taiwan might trim defence spending,¹¹ while a former Trump adviser bluntly stated that if Taiwan appears unwilling to bear the burden of its own security, it risks being seen in Washington as a "liability rather than an asset".¹² This dynamic – with US security guarantees becoming conditional on Taiwan's effort – marks a significant shift.

Domestic politics and defence budget allocations

Domestic political factors also complicate Taipei's calculus underpinning its current approach to Washington. In 2024 – the global "super year" of elections – citizens of both Taiwan and the US headed to the polls. In the Asian democracy, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) witnessed an unprecedented, third-consecutive victory in the presidential elections. At the same time, the party lost its majority in the Legislative Yuan (parliament), requiring – thus far hardly successful – cohabitation between the DPP-controlled executive branch and an informal coalition of the KMT and the Taiwan People's Party (TPP) in the unicameral parliament.

One of the significant points of contention between the two parties has been the national budget: The KMT-controlled legislature passed the 2025 budget with unprecedented slashes and freezes in almost all policy areas. The DPP's defence priorities – that is, domestic submarines and civil defence programmes – were also a conspicuous target. Prominent members of the KMT openly questioned the feasibility of the submarine programme, justifying funding freezes as safeguards for ensuring successful sea acceptance tests.

KMT legislators also questioned the sustainability of increasing the defence budget at the expense

of other policy areas that are also important for the nation's overall resilience, thereby mirroring the “guns vs butter” arguments frequently raised in Europe in light of the ongoing full-scale invasion in Ukraine. In fact, the withdrawal of US support for Ukraine in early 2025 further fuelled the opposition's scepticism about what they viewed as an excessive reliance on the US for national security. “Didn't Ukraine show determination? And hasn't it now been ruthlessly abandoned?”¹³ asked KMT legislator and then-Foreign Affairs and National Defence Committee co-convenor Kin Cyang rhetorically.

In August 2025, the Legislative Yuan passed a special provision permitting the executive to draft a special budget for defence procurement in response to China's military activities around Taiwan. The procurement of necessary materials should take place domestically in order to provide an additional boost to the nation's economy amid tariff pressure from Trump 2.0. Nevertheless, the initial efforts by the informal KMT-TPP

coalition to withhold allocations for defence programmes demonstrate crucial vulnerabilities both to the nation's defence posture stemming from polarisation along partisan fault lines and to the politicisation of security and defence expenditures.

Washington prioritises preparing for a massive invasion or missile onslaught.

Asymmetric defence: Converging goals, diverging visions

Beyond defence spending, another key component of bargaining in US-Taiwan defence ties is the allocation of resources to particular procurement projects. Both Taipei and Washington rhetorically agree that Taiwan should adopt an asymmetric defence posture. This “porcupine”



Controversial priorities: Despite a joint US-Taiwan commitment to an asymmetric defence strategy, Taipei continues to invest in traditional, high-cost systems – such as the F-16 fighter jets, which consumed around 70 per cent of the 2019 defence budget. Photo: © NurPhoto, Imago.



In order to maintain its security relationship with the United States, pressure is mounting on Taiwan's high-tech industry. Semiconductor manufacturer TSMC has pledged investments worth 165 billion US dollars for facilities in Arizona. Photo: © Pond5 Images, Imago.

strategy emphasises small, mobile, cost-effective weapons for deterring the much-larger People's Liberation Army. In practice, however, the two sides have not always seen eye to eye on what asymmetric defence means in terms of procurement priorities.

The US tends to define an optimal asymmetric arsenal as one that is heavy in anti-ship and anti-air missiles, sea mines, coastal defence craft, drones, and cyber capabilities – that is, systems that can inflict maximum pain on an invader at minimal cost.¹⁴ US officials have grown frustrated when Taiwan instead spends lavishly on traditional big-ticket platforms. For example, Taiwan's 2019 decision to buy new F-16 jets devoured 70 per cent of that year's defence

budget on a single platform – a move viewed in Washington as inefficient given Taiwan's more urgent needs for survivable air defences and missile batteries.¹⁵ More recently, Taipei sought to purchase advanced E-2D Hawkeye early-warning aircraft and anti-submarine helicopters only to have the US side quietly nix the request as incompatible with Taiwan's need for asymmetric capabilities.¹⁶ Such US refusals to sell specific high-end systems reflect a belief that Taiwan should invest in greater quantities of smaller weapons rather than in a handful of expensive assets that the PLA might destroy early in a conventional conflict.

This divergence in the operationalisation of "asymmetric capabilities" for Taiwan exposes



a fundamental gap between US and Taiwanese threat perceptions. Washington prioritises preparing for a massive invasion or missile onslaught, envisioning asymmetric systems as the most optimal way to deny China a quick victory. While Taiwanese defence planners acknowledge the threat of conventional kinetic confrontation amid an effort towards a physical confrontation, they prioritise preparedness to respond to “grey-zone” coercion, which they face on a daily basis. This coercion includes constant PLA air and naval encroachments as well as other manifestations of sub-threshold pressures. Consequently, many in Taiwan fear that an exclusive reliance on asymmetric weapons (such as missiles without an air force or mini missile boats without larger vessels) could leave the nation unable to respond to these peacetime incursions or to maintain control of its airspace and seas.

Even staunch advocates of asymmetry in Taiwan concede that abandoning traditional fighters and warships might forfeit the “baseline” capabilities needed to handle a range of contingencies. On the one hand, their argument may highlight the need for Taiwan’s military to maintain some modern fighters, ships, and tanks in order to prevent ceding the initiative to Beijing in scenarios short of a full invasion. On the other hand, this narrative may point to institutional inertia at play: Indeed, generations of Taiwanese officers have been trained to operate traditional platforms, and a sudden shift to unorthodox asymmetric concepts raises fears of obsolescence within the services.¹⁷ These factors help explain why – despite embracing asymmetric principles on paper – Taiwan continues to buy a mix of symmetric capabilities (e.g. F-16Vs, indigenous submarines, advanced missiles) – a hedging approach that sometimes frustrates US advisors.

The main lesson for Taiwan here is that it may need to hasten the modernisation of the military in order to “fall in line” with expectations of the Trump 2.0 administration. While the aforementioned commercial interests will continue to play an important role in US–Taiwan defence ties, Washington clearly cares not only about dollars spent, but also about the way in which they are

spent. The 2025 Quadrennial Defence Review stipulates that the procurement of equipment necessary for bolstering asymmetric capabilities will constitute a priority.¹⁸ However, it remains to be seen whether Taipei will be able to effectively converge with the Trump 2.0 administration on the direction of its military modernisation.

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Delayed arms deliveries: The logistical limitation of trust

Even as Taiwan boosts its defence budgets and orders new weapons, a less-discussed limitation threatens to undercut its military readiness: namely chronic delays in the delivery of US arms. In June 2025, the value of undelivered US arms sales to Taiwan stood at roughly 21.5 billion US dollars – a backlog built up primarily from deals approved during Trump’s first term.¹⁹ Should Washington and the US defence industry remain impotent in fixing their systemic delivery problems, Taiwan may find itself forced to face China with outdated equipment – such as World War II-era artillery – simply because new replacements have not arrived.

These delays carry serious strategic costs, which can be measured in both monetary and reputational terms. Firstly, they hinder force modernisation, leaving key capability gaps unfilled despite the high value of this procurement. They also erode political trust and momentum in Taiwan’s defence investments. Taiwanese lawmakers have grown wary of approving large budgets when the weapons paid for may not show up on time. Indeed, US arms sales that had experienced delays were also an essential object of budgetary freezes that the Legislative Yuan imposed at the beginning of 2025. The logic is to hold the funds in escrow until there is proof of progress in deliveries – a clear sign of frustration over the tardiness of US suppliers.

The absence of promised arms is undermining taxpayers' faith in the value of defence budgets, thereby making it more difficult for legislators to justify such allocations – and crucially also increases therein – before their constituents. This creates a vicious cycle: Late deliveries slow Taiwan's military buildup, and the disappointment in turn makes the nation's parliament more scrutinising before authorising purchases. Breaking this cycle will require concerted action in Washington. Accelerating production lines, prioritising Taiwan in export queues, or even drawing from US stockpiles (as was partially done with Stingers under Biden through the Presidential Draw-down Authority²⁰) could help whittle down the backlog. If the Trump administration can make a visible dent in the remaining backlog during its second term, this would bolster Taiwan's near-term readiness and also reassure the Taiwanese public that the US is a reliable security partner. Conversely, continued delays – caused by either bureaucratic inertia or new conflicts that divert supplies – would be a severe blow to Taiwan's defence preparations at the worst time.

Economic and non-traditional security dimension of US-Taiwan ties

Uncertainty in US-Taiwan ties extends beyond defence. Trump's assault on the global free trade regime – notably by imposing a 20 per cent tariff on imports from Taiwan, which is higher than the 15 per cent rates secured by allies such as Japan and South Korea – is straining Taiwan's economy. At the same time, Trump's transactional approach to security has seen him demand that Taipei "pay up" for protection. This *quid pro quo* dynamic risks creating new dependencies that exacerbate Taiwan's vulnerabilities in non-traditional security domains such as economic security and food security.

The silicon shield

A core economic cost of maintaining close security ties with the US has been heavy pressure on Taiwan's flagship high-tech industry to shift critical production stateside and to invest big in America. Trump has openly accused Taiwan of

having "stolen" the US semiconductor industry and pushed for tariffs on Taiwanese chips – moves that reportedly contributed to the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co.'s (TSMC) announcement of a 100 billion US dollar chip fab investment plan in Arizona.²¹ Indeed, TSMC has now committed around 165 billion US dollars for new facilities in Arizona, although it insists that the bulk of its advanced production will remain in Taiwan. Washington's demands go even further, with US officials having floated a "50-50" split in chip production that Taipei flatly rejected as exploitative and as undermining Taiwan's vaunted silicon shield.²²

Taiwan's reliance on imports leaves it highly vulnerable to maritime blockades and supply disruptions.

These pressures have sparked domestic backlash. Opposition figures warn that diverting such massive resources overseas could hollow out Taiwan's technological base. KMT as well as TPP lawmakers blasted the 50-50 proposal, with KMT's legislator Hsu Yu-Chen calling it an "act of exploitation and plunder".²³ With key semiconductor assets controlled by the US, Taiwanese firms have limited capacity to resist external pressure, which urges these firms to reduce their reliance on the US market in order to avoid strategic vulnerabilities. In short, while bolstering defence cooperation with Washington, Taiwan is paying an economic price by sacrificing elements of its tech primacy and facing internal disputes over how to balance security imperatives with the integrity of its silicon shield.

Energy security

Taiwan imports roughly 98 per cent of its fuel supply and has minimal strategic stockpiles, with currently only about 12 days' worth of natural gas reserves on its main island. This heavy import dependence means the island is acutely susceptible to a maritime blockade and a supply

shock.²⁴ Simulations consistently show that in a crisis that would lead Taiwan to deplete its scarce natural gas supplies, societal resilience would be undermined, while continuity of the export-dependent manufacturing economy would be compromised.²⁵ This finding underlines energy as a potential Achilles' heel in any conflict scenario. And these risks have not gone unnoticed. Under the previous administration of President Tsai Ing-Wen, Taipei launched efforts to bolster reserves and diversify suppliers, aiming to expand liquefied natural gas (LNG) storage to cover over 20 days of usage by 2030. However, rather than simply helping Taiwan improve resilience, the Trump administration has leveraged Taiwan's insecurity in order to push US energy exports.

Washington is pressing Taipei to significantly boost imports of American LNG, particularly from the ambitious new Alaska LNG project that Trump champions. In March, Taiwan's state-run CPC Corporation signed a non-binding letter of intent to purchase six million tonnes of LNG annually from Alaska and to invest in associated infrastructure.²⁶ President Lai Ching-Te has framed these purchases as necessary in order to "ensure the island's energy security", even pledging to "massively ramp up" US energy imports as part of reducing Taiwan's bilateral trade surplus. However, this growing reliance on US LNG creates a new form of strategic dependency²⁷ that ties Taiwan's energy fortunes to a single foreign source and a higher-cost project, thereby crowding out diversification to other suppliers while still leaving the nation exposed to any disruption of maritime supply lines. In essence, Trump's LNG diplomacy with Taiwan may strengthen bilateral ties on paper, but it does so by deepening Taiwan's dependence on imported fuel, while true resilience arguably requires the opposite: namely broadening energy sources, investing in renewables, and expanding stockpiles at home.

Agricultural deals and food security

Taiwan's geography and isolation mean that it must import a large share of its food, thereby exposing another vulnerability in a blockade

scenario. According to the most recent data from the Ministry of Agriculture, the nation's food self-sufficiency rate by calories sank to barely 30 per cent in 2023. Moreover, nearly 40 per cent of its grains and oilseeds come from the US alone. Consequently, even a limited PRC naval blockade could rapidly choke off food supplies, thereby causing price spikes and shortages of staple commodities.

Taiwan should pursue diversification strategies – including deepening ties with Europe – in order to mitigate risk and enhance national resilience.

In September 2025, a large Taiwanese Agricultural Goodwill Mission toured US farm states and signed a series of procurement agreements. Taiwanese firms committed to buying ten billion US dollars' worth of American farm goods – including corn, soybeans, wheat, and beef – over the next four years. President Lai touted these purchases as a way to "enhance Taiwan's food security" by improving the feedstock supply for Taiwan's livestock industry.²⁸ While such arrangements might curry favour in Washington and alleviate trade imbalances, they run the risk of deepening Taiwan's overreliance on external food sources.

Opportunities for boosting Taiwan-Europe ties

As the costs and vulnerabilities of over-reliance on the US become increasingly clear, Taiwan's leaders should be turning to diversification strategies – including deepening ties with Europe – as essential tools for mitigating risk and enhancing national resilience in the face of geopolitical uncertainty.

Just as Taiwan mitigates risk by diversifying its ties, Europe too should bolster its engagements

with Taiwan through a strategy that respects Taiwan's agency as a standalone, like-minded democratic partner and that does not require constant transatlantic handholding. The following concrete steps could bolster Taiwan–Europe relations:

- **Enhancing dual-use tech cooperation:** The EU and its member states should pursue the joint development of dual-use technologies – such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) – with Taiwan in order to reinforce asymmetric defence capabilities. For instance, the EU could include Taiwan in its Readiness 2030²⁹ initiative, thereby enabling joint R&D and the procurement of unmanned systems. This would help Taiwan scale up its production of military drones while de-risking Europe's own supply chains by leveraging Taiwan's "non-red" tech base.
- **Deepening renewable energy collaboration:** Europe should expand partnerships with Taiwan in renewable energy in order to strengthen both sides' energy security. European investments already bolster Taiwan's energy transition. Indeed, Denmark's Ørsted is now the largest contributor to Taiwan's offshore wind capacity, and Sweden's Baseload Capital's projects will double Taiwan's geothermal output, thereby reducing reliance on imported fuels and enhancing Taiwan's energy resilience. Scaling up such joint efforts in offshore wind as well as in geothermal and other clean energy sectors would help hedge against supply shocks while advancing shared climate goals.
- **Joining shared capacity-building initiatives:** The EU and its member states should actively participate in Taiwan's international training frameworks in order to enable pragmatic exchanges on shared challenges. In particular, Europe can systematise its participation in workshops under the Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF) – a platform for international capacity-building. Such engagement on issues ranging from public health to supply-chain resilience would enhance both

sides' cooperation in safeguarding global public goods and would also affirm Taiwan's role as an equal partner in international problem-solving despite the limitations imposed by individual countries' formulations of their own one-China policies.

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