

Tensions Around Taiwan: Summary of 2024

Ori Sela | No. 1947 | April 1, 2025

In May 2024, Taiwan's new president, Lai Ching-te, was inaugurated. Since then, tensions around Taiwan have continued to escalate, including stronger rhetoric by all parties, increased US arms sales to Taiwan, legislative moves in the US Congress targeting China, and, of course, military threats by China. In early December 2024, tensions peaked when China conducted significant naval and aerial military activities around Taiwan without any prior announcement of an official exercise. Reports from Taiwan indicated that China's large-scale military maneuvers were unprecedented in nearly thirty years. Concurrently, Donald Trump's victory in the US presidential election has fueled further speculation about the future trajectory of tensions around Taiwan, with most assuming further escalation. This article examines the key events of 2024 concerning Taiwan and the main trends heading into 2025.

One of the most common subjects of discussion in relation to Taiwan is the "status quo." In the Taiwanese context, this refers to maintaining the "existing situation," with three key elements. First, China considers Taiwan an integral part of its territory (a rebellious province) that should return to the motherland under the "One China" principle, but does not pursue this goal through military occupation. Second, Taiwan does not declare formal independence but continues to operate as a state, albeit unrecognized by most of the world. Third, the United States, for its part, acknowledges the "One China" policy and does not recognize Taiwan as an independent state, yet it continues to supply Taiwan with weapons and maintains extensive relations with it. On the surface, this status quo has remained in place for decades; however, in recent years, it has gradually shifted due to changes in the actions of all relevant parties. In this context, 2024 continued the trend toward altering the status quo—despite rhetorical commitments to its preservation—leading to heightened tensions around Taiwan. These developments were influenced, and at times driven, by the election cycles that took place that year in both Taiwan and the United States.

Taiwan's presidential and legislative elections were held on January 13, 2024. Reports indicated that China attempted to influence the elections through various methods, mainly via social media and disinformation campaigns. Despite China's efforts to sway the election in favor of the Kuomintang Party (KMT), William Lai Ching-te of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)—the ruling party for the last eight years—won the presidency with 40% of the vote. However, in the parliamentary elections, the DPP lost its majority, making the KMT the largest party in the legislature, although without securing a majority of its own. This left the smaller Taiwan People's Party (TPP) in the role of the balancing force in parliament. This created an unusual dynamic in Taiwan's political history, in which the president comes from one side of the political spectrum while lacking a majority in parliament. This dynamic has had an impact

throughout the year, as the new president's numerous attempts to pass laws, budgets, and appointments have repeatedly failed.

The immediate responses from both China and the United States to Taiwan's election results suggested efforts to maintain the "status quo." China reaffirmed its stance that Taiwan is part of China and that there will be no compromise on this issue, reasserting its goal of bringing Taiwan back into its fold "peacefully." However, Beijing has not ruled out the use of force if reunification proves entirely unfeasible. This was a relatively moderate response, accompanied by an explanation that the "One China" principle is the "solid anchor for peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait." Immediately after Taiwan's elections, US President Biden explicitly stated that Washington "does not support Taiwan's independence." Taiwan, meanwhile, awaited its new president's inauguration in May amid a seemingly calm atmosphere—at least on the surface.

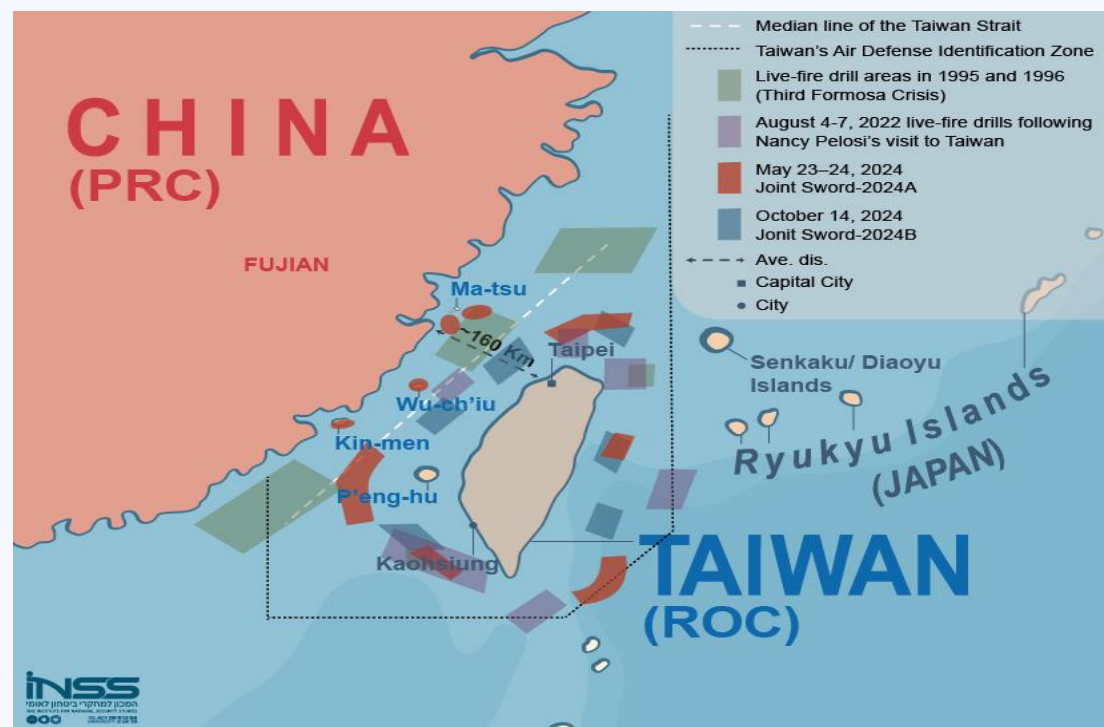
Moreover, China and the United States made efforts to improve their relations throughout 2024, following the Biden–Xi Jinping summit in San Francisco in November 2023 and the renewal of their security dialogue. Indeed, in the first months of the year, meetings and discussions between senior Chinese and American officials continued, also in an attempt to ease tensions over Taiwan. However, both sides also took actions that escalated tensions. In February 2024, China announced contentious flight routes for civilian flights near Taiwan. A month later, it increased the frequency of military flights and expanded its naval presence around Taiwan, including multiple incursions into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) and crossings of the median line in the Taiwan Strait. The United States, for its part, increased the frequency with which it announced arms sales to Taiwan and the upgrading of the Taiwanese F-16 fighter jets. Congressional delegations also visited Taiwan in February and March at a significantly higher rate than in previous years. A call between Presidents Xi and Biden in early April may have (very) briefly cooled the tensions, but the key question remained of how Taiwan's new president could enter office amid relations with China and the United States.

On May 20, 2024, Taiwan's President Lai Ching-te was sworn into office. In his inaugural speech, Lai referenced the 1996 swearing-in of Lee Teng-hui, Taiwan's first democratically elected president, noting that the former president—who was from the Kuomintang, unlike Lai, who is from the DPP—had sent a message during his inauguration to the international community that Taiwan is "a sovereign and independent state." However, Lai took Lee's quote out of its original context, as in 1996, Lee's remarks were very cautious and even opposed the idea of full "Taiwanese independence." Although Lai's comment was not the central theme of his speech, it became the main headline.

In his speech, Lai also reaffirmed the position of his predecessor, Tsai Ing-wen, on the "Four Commitments" outlined in 2021. These commitments emphasized maintaining Taiwan's free and democratic constitutional system, preserving its independence from Chinese influence, safeguarding its sovereignty from foreign forces, and ensuring that Taiwan's future is decided by the will of its citizens. Although Lai's speech later struck a conciliatory tone toward China, his statements were enough for Beijing to label him a separatist and a troublemaker who must

bear the consequences. The response was swift: three days after his inauguration, China conducted the large-scale military exercise Joint Sword 2024A (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Map of Chinese Military Activity



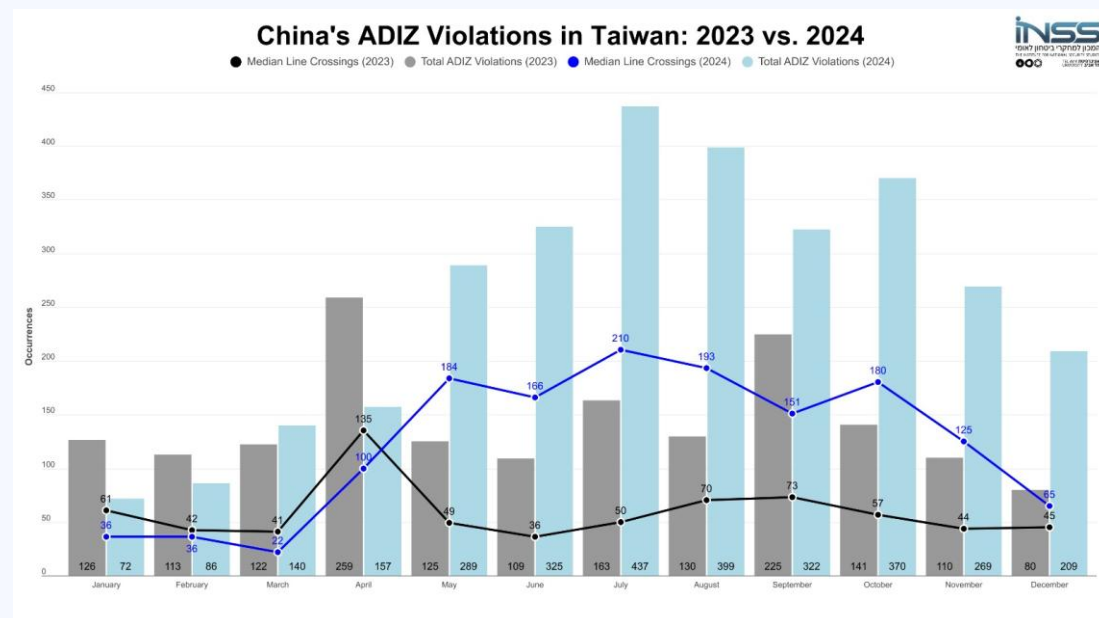
In October 2024, Lai delivered Taiwan’s National Day speech, asserting that Taiwan and China “are not subordinate to each other” and that China “has no right to represent Taiwan.” He also reaffirmed his commitment to preventing any erosion of Taiwan’s sovereignty or annexation while strengthening the island’s security and defense capabilities. He argued that Taiwan’s resilience is key to maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. While reaffirming these commitments, he also expressed willingness to cooperate with the People’s Republic of China. At the same time, Lai portrayed Taiwan as a model democracy, subtly implying that China, by contrast, is not. Toward the end of his speech, he declared his determination (and, in his view, the determination of all parties in Taiwan) to “defend Taiwan’s national sovereignty.” Immediately afterward, he reaffirmed Taiwan’s commitment to maintaining “peace, stability, and the status quo.” These messages, naturally perceived in the People’s Republic of China as contradictory, served as the trigger—at least according to Chinese statements—for the second major military exercise of 2024, Joint Sword 2024B (see Figure 1).

In August, between the two events in May and October, President Lai visited Kinmen Island, near China’s coast, to mark the 66th anniversary of the 1958 “Second Taiwan Strait Crisis,” when the island, governed by Taiwan, came under Chinese attack. During his visit, Lai called for the preservation of Taiwan’s sovereignty, urged resilience in the face of threats from China, and, of course, emphasized the need for peace and stability on both sides of the strait. In October, shortly after Taiwan’s National Day and following China’s second large-scale military drill, Lai returned to Kinmen Island to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Battle of

Kinmen. This was one of the few battles that the Kuomintang won in October 1949, thereby keeping the island under Taiwan’s control. During this visit, Lai reiterated that no external force could determine Taiwan’s future and continued to advocate for dialogue, peace, and stability in the strait.

Meanwhile, China continued its threats, significantly increasing its military activity around Taiwan. The average number of Chinese Air Force incursions into Taiwan’s Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) rose from 141 per month in 2023 to 300 per month between March and November 2024 (see Figure 2). Similarly, the average number of midline crossings in the Taiwan Strait grew from 58 per month in 2023 to 148 per month between March and November 2024, mirroring statements by Taiwanese officials, US decisions on arms sales or aid to Taiwan, legislative moves in the US Congress against China, and high-level exchanges between American and Taiwanese officials.

Figure 2. Air Force Violations



Source: Gerald C. Brown and Ben Lewis, Taiwan ADIZ Violations, <https://chinapower.csis.org/data/taiwan-adiz-violations>

At the end of November, as Taiwan’s president embarked on a visit to Pacific island nations—Marshall Islands, Tuvalu, and Palau, three of the twelve countries that still officially recognize Taiwan—and made unofficial stopovers in Hawaii and Guam, which included a phone call with US Speaker of the House Mike Johnson, China once again escalated its rhetoric, condemning the visit. Upon Lai’s return to Taiwan in early December, Chinese military activity around Taiwan intensified significantly. However, this did not involve major airspace incursions (and is not therefore reflected in Figure 2). Media headlines speculated that China was conducting another military drill, Joint Sword 2024C, while reports—mostly from Taiwanese sources, some anonymous and unofficial—suggested an unprecedented Chinese military deployment, particularly in naval operations, not seen since the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1996.

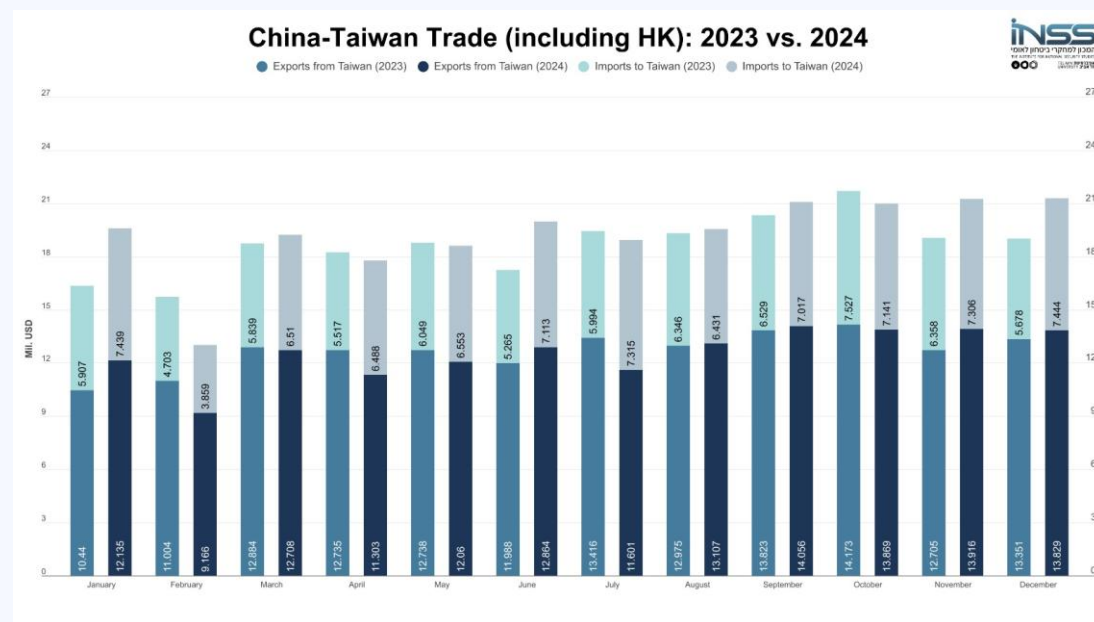
Anonymous and unverified reports claimed that China was operating along the entire “First Island Chain”—the imaginary line connecting islands from Japan in the north to Southeast Asia, considered a first line of defense east of China. The media frenzy in Taiwan over this Chinese military activity may have reflected an effort by the Taiwanese government to engage its domestic audience, rallying public support and raising awareness of security needs. At the same time, the administration also seemed to be sending a broader message externally to its perceived allies, emphasizing that China’s actions were not solely directed at Taiwan (hence the references to the First Island Chain). This was likely intended as a strategic warning to the incoming Trump administration in the United States.

Meanwhile, China imposed new airspace restrictions in certain regions, particularly in the northeast, off its eastern coast—from Shanghai down to Hong Kong. Although its naval activity was indeed more intense than before, there were no reports of particularly unusual air maneuvers compared to previous exercises. The Chinese Foreign Ministry repeatedly emphasized that Taiwan remained a “red line” that would not be crossed, warning that China would not allow the United States to “use Taiwan to contain China” or any separatist “independence schemes”—whether pursued by Taiwan alone or in coordination with other countries. Beijing also accused Taiwan of provocation and collusion with “foreign forces.” However, China did not directly respond to questions about its specific military operations.

It appears that China’s military actions were not solely or primarily a response to Lai’s travels; rather, Beijing seized the opportunity to send a message to the new US administration—marking clear “red lines” for Washington regarding Taiwan. At the same time, China may have also been signaling the limits of its own actions in the near term. Unlike in the past, Beijing did not officially announce a military drill, set a timeline for its operations, or make public statements during this period of increased military activity. While the Chinese social media sphere was abuzz with discussions and speculation about the military activity, Beijing seemingly adopted a strategy of ambiguity—possibly to heighten concerns in Taiwan or to avoid drawing harsher criticism from the United States.

It is also important to remember that despite the tensions and alienation in China–Taiwan relations at the government-to-government (G2G) level, China consistently attempts to exert a positive influence over the people of Taiwan through various means. Thus, even as military activity escalated in December, China held a range of engagement events, including a cross-strait business conference, student visits, and—immediately after the military operations—another visit to China, the second one in 2024, by former Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou. Additionally, Taipei hosted the Taipei–Shanghai Twin City Forum. In all these events, China repeatedly reinforced its core messages of acceptance of the “1992 consensus” and the “One China” principle; opposition to Taiwanese independence; condemnation of the DPP; and encouragement of the “shared aspiration” of all Chinese citizens (including Taiwan) for reunification. It is no surprise, then, that China–Taiwan trade did not decline in 2024 but actually increased by 3.5% compared to 2023, with Taiwan continuing to enjoy a particularly strong trade surplus (around \$70 billion). China, therefore, is increasing military pressure (“the stick”) while simultaneously strengthening civilian incentives (“the carrot”)—applying a dual strategy of force and enticement toward Taiwan.

Figure 3. China–Taiwan Trade (including Hong Kong) 2023 vs. 2024



Source: Ministry of Finance, Republic of China, <https://web02.mof.gov.tw/njswww/webMain.aspx?sys=100&funid=defisptel>

While the Biden administration maintained a moderate—perhaps moderating— approach, Donald Trump took an unprecedented step by inviting Chinese President Xi Jinping to attend his inauguration in January 2025. This invitation came against the backdrop of Trump and his administration signaling a more aggressive economic stance towards China, while Beijing issued its own retaliatory declarations. Although President Xi did not attend—the invitation may have even been seen by the Chinese as American patronization—the very act of inviting him (and China’s decision to send its vice president instead), along with Trump’s remark that “China can help” in achieving a settlement in Ukraine, suggests that Trump may be seeking to reach some form of arrangement with China. Whether this potential arrangement will involve economic confrontation or cooperation—or a mix of both—remains to be seen.

The question remains whether Taiwan will also have to pay part of the price for such an arrangement. Although Trump was quick to threaten tariffs on Taiwan, as of this writing, he has instead imposed tariffs on China. It is still too early to determine the significance of this move. One way or another, the “status quo” is no longer what it once was. Indeed, on the surface, little has changed—China has not invaded Taiwan, Taiwan has not declared independence, and the United States continues to uphold the “One China” policy. However, beyond the increasingly radical rhetoric from all sides, several indicators point to a more precarious and volatile status quo than before. These include changes in Chinese military activity around Taiwan; greater US congressional involvement (through visits, legislation, and arms deals); and an increase in both the frequency and intensity of statements by Taiwan’s president. This does not necessarily mean that war is imminent in the short term, as none of the parties—including China—currently has an interest in such a scenario. Moreover, the depth and intensity of civilian ties between China and Taiwan, despite frozen or deteriorating

government-level relations, demonstrate that the military-political dimension is just one of several dynamics at play.

How US–China–Taiwan relations will shift under the Trump administration remains to be seen as 2025 unfolds. However, it is important to remember that Taiwan is China’s most sensitive issue—both symbolically and strategically. As tensions in this triangle intensify, the consequences will extend beyond these three players, affecting other countries, including Israel. The United States and China may also heighten their sensitivity and expectations toward nations they perceive as friends or strategic partners. Furthermore, if Washington seeks concessions or cooperation from Beijing, China will likely expect reciprocal gestures on the Taiwan issue—even if these do not necessarily mean full acceptance of China’s position. This could also be relevant in the context of the war in Ukraine and broader negotiations or power shifts in the Middle East, particularly regarding Iran.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Ela Greenberg