

'Status Quo' in Taiwan: What This Actually Means

'One China' means different things to Taiwan and China. Professor Watanabe examines why that is with perspectives from inside Taiwan, China, Japan and the US.

April 9, 2024 By **Professor Toshio Watanabe**



Democratic Progressive Party's Lai Ching-te, declares victory in the Taiwan presidential election on January 13, Taipei City. (©Sankei by Kengo Matsumoto)

In mid-January 2024, the candidate of the Democratic Progressive Party, Dr Lai Ching-te won the Taiwan presidential election. Lai, who currently serves as vice president, has been clear that he will negotiate on an equal footing with China.

Hou Yu-ih, the Nationalist Party's candidate, stated he would uphold the ROC's [Taiwan's] Constitution, which is sometimes called the "One China Constitution,"

while protecting Taiwan's freedom and democracy. A third candidate, Dr Ko Wen-je of the Taiwan People's Party, said he would play a role as a bridge between the United States and China.

No candidate sought a path to the unification of Taiwan and China.



Supporters gather in front of DPP Headquarters on election night to watch the countdown. On January 13 in Taipei. (©Robert D Eldridge)

Where Taiwan Stands on 'Status Quo'

According to a 2023 survey by National Chengchi University's Election Study Center on the popular will of Taiwan's residents, 61% want to "maintain the status quo" in Taiwan, and 63% identify themselves as "Taiwanese" rather than "Chinese." These results were repeated elsewhere, suggesting that there is little political space for pro-China candidates in Taiwan today.

In the meantime, China continues its repeated military provocations, which have grown in recent months. Taiwan, as a "small country with a small population," is

faced with very difficult twin tasks of dealing with China while continuing to follow the "status quo" line.

But what exactly is the "status quo" that people speak about when "maintaining the status quo"? Here, I would like to consider this question from three angles.



On February 26, VP Lai Ching-te shakes hands with Kazuyuki Katayama, chief representative of the Japan-Taiwan Exchange Association. (Courtesy of Taiwan President's Office)

US and Japanese Perspectives in 1972

First, how did Japan and the United States view Taiwan when establishing diplomatic relations with China?

In the 1972 Japan-China Joint Communiqué that opened Japan-China diplomatic relations, the parties stated:

The Government of the People's Republic of China reiterates that Taiwan is an inalienable part of the territory of the People's Republic of China. The Government of Japan fully understands and respects this stand of the Government of the People's

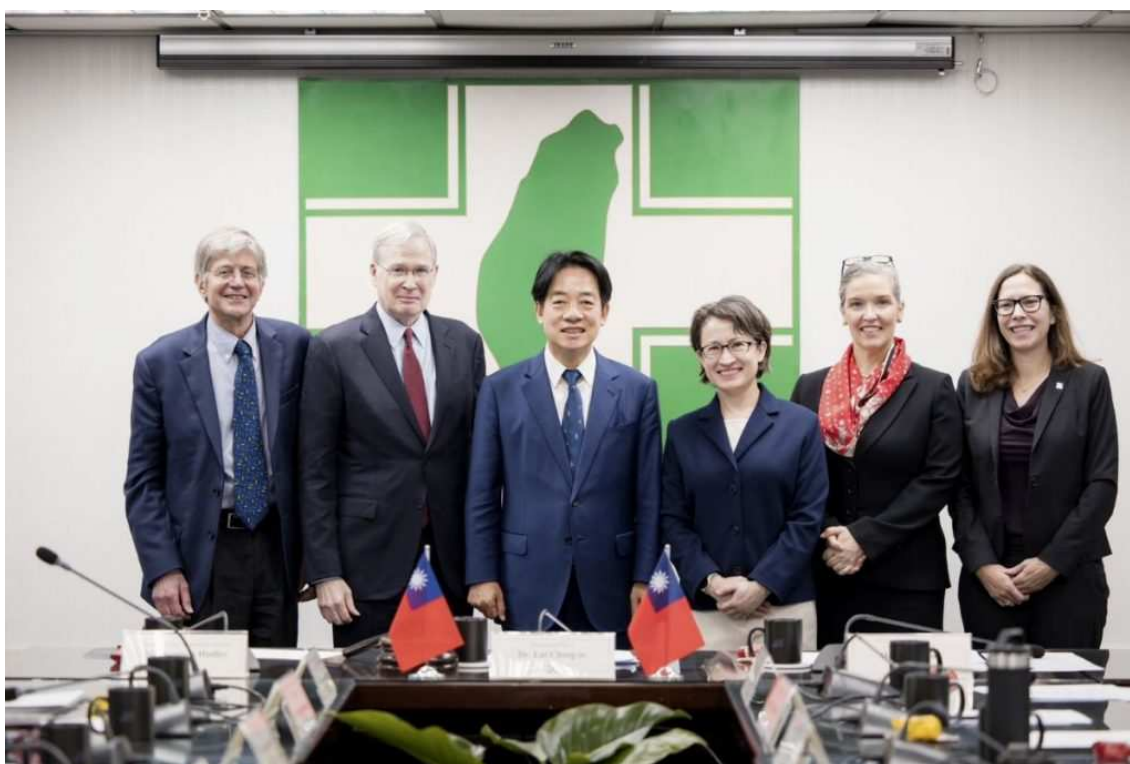
Republic of China, and it firmly maintains its stand under Article 8 of the Potsdam Proclamation.

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Takakazu Kuriyama, who participated in the negotiations as Treaties Division Director of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, later elaborated on the meaning of "understand and respect" as follows:

If China's claim that Taiwan is an integral part of the People's Republic of China were accepted, China's use of force against Taiwan would be justified under international law as part of a civil war (a legitimate government's suppression of a rebel regime). Moreover, the legal basis for our country's support of US military actions in the defense of Taiwan would be lost as it would be seen as unlawful interference in China's domestic affairs.

His arguments, which appeared in the retired diplomats' association journal, *Kasumigaseki Kaiho*, in November 2007 take on a new urgency now.



Former Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg, former presidential aide Stephen

Hadley, along with others from the US delegation meet Taiwanese Vice President Lai Ching-te in Taipei on January 15, 2024. (© Democratic Progressive Party via Kyodo)

'Acknowledge' and 'Understand' Are Not 'Agreement'

The "Shanghai Communiqué," was a joint US-China statement exchanged between President Richard Nixon and Premier Zhou Enlai. It took place during the former's visit to Peking just prior to the issuance of the China-Japan Joint Statement. The document states, "The United States acknowledges that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China." Here, "acknowledges" is a neutral diplomatic term. It does not mean "recognize" or "agree."

Japan's "fully understands and respects" goes a bit further than the US's "acknowledges" stance. But again, it does not mean "recognize" or "agree" at all. The statements regarding the position of the United States, Japan, and China are first and foremost indispensable in looking at the "status quo" of Taiwan.



Former Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou, also representing the Taiwan KMT (Nationalist) Party (right) met with Song Tao, director of the Taiwan Affairs Office of the Chinese State Council in Shenzhen, PRC, on April 1. ((© Xinhua News Agency/Kyodo)

The '1992 Consensus'

Next, I wish to examine the so-called "1992 Consensus." This was said to have been agreed after direct discussions between China and Taiwan on the issue of unification. At the talks, both Taiwan and China called for there to be "one China." However, the Taiwanese side meant the "Republic of China" [Taiwan] and the Communist side meant the "People's Republic of China."

There was no written agreement. Moreover, neither Lee Teng-hui, the president at the time, nor Koo Chen-fu, who represented the Taiwanese side in the negotiations, acknowledged any consensus. However, the Chinese side has stubbornly maintained that this "phantom agreement" is the basis for cross-strait exchanges. The CCP also says that the interests of the people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait would be severely damaged if this consensus is not recognized.



Spokesperson Zhu Fenglian of the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council of China holds a press conference, February 28, Beijing (©Kyodo)

China's Perspective on the '1992 Consensus'

Leading Chinese international political scientist ShiYinhong believes that President-elect Lai Ching-te is a de facto "Taiwan independence" advocate. He wrote in a recent article appearing in the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* on January 29 that:

China will never hold talks with the Lai administration. The condition for dialogue is Taiwan's acceptance of the "1992 Consensus," in which the principle of "one China" is said to have been confirmed by both sides. Without this, there can be no coming to a mutual understanding between China and Taiwan.

In the Chinese Communist Party, the "1992 Consensus" was also included in the "Resolution on the Party's History and Achievements," a key document of the Sixth Plenary Session of the 19th Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in November 2021. It states as follows:

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We uphold the one-China principle and the 1992 Consensus. We firmly oppose separatist activities seeking "Taiwan independence." We firmly oppose foreign interference. We have maintained the initiative and ability to steer cross-Strait relations.

China will never hold talks with the Lai administration. Also, the condition for dialogue is Taiwan's acceptance of the '1992 Consensus,' in which the principle of 'one China' is said to have been confirmed by both sides. Without this, however, there can be no coming to a mutual understanding between China and Taiwan.

The "Status Quo" of the "1992 Consensus" is difficult for Taiwan, but it has no choice other than to respond firmly.



A young boy waves flags at a DPP rally. (©Robert D Eldridge)

Taiwanese Identity

Finally, I will discuss the third aspect of my argument. In the opinion poll cited at the beginning of this commentary, the percentage of those who said "I am Taiwanese" was 63%. However, in 1992, a mere 18% answered that way. Conversely, those who answered "I am Chinese" accounted for 46% in 1992 and 26% in 2023, respectively. A more recent poll by another organization showed that only 2% felt they were Chinese. *(See the report: Record low of 2.4% identify solely as Chinese in latest NCCU poll / Taiwan News (youtube.com))*

Those who were born in Taiwan and spent their formative years in the era of democratization, and who look with despair at the failure of Hong Kong's "one country, two systems" promise and the current regime of Xi Jinping, which has gone to the extreme of tyranny, must have become an irreversible force to strengthen Taiwan's identity.

The greatest power to maintain the "status quo" must come from within this sense of "natural independence." (That is, a rejuvenated independent streak by those born in recent years and those yet to be born.) These are the individuals who enjoy the freedom and rights that a democratic, prosperous, and sovereign Taiwan has provided.

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(Translation by Robert D Eldridge)