

# Taiwan Strait (Cross-Strait Relations)

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**“Taiwan Strait” is political shorthand for relations between mainland China and the breakaway (as China sees it) island of Taiwan (officially known as the Republic of China), as well as the name of the actual body of water separating the two nations.**

“Taiwan Strait” has become the shorthand political term for the gulf in relations between the government on Taiwan and that on mainland China, as well as attempts to bridge that gulf. Technically the Strait is the body of water—a mere 160 kilometers at its narrowest—that separates the island of Taiwan from the mainland. “Cross-Strait Relations” is the Chinese media term used to describe interactions between Taiwan and China.

Over the years Cross-Strait Relations have undergone many phases, from armed conflict to periods of negotiation. After the civil war ended in China in 1949, the losing Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, KMT) and its leader, Chiang Kai-shek, fled the mainland to the island to re-establish the Republic of China under U.S. protection. Some 2 million refugees from the mainland also fled the Communist regime to live on Taiwan. During Chiang’s reign, he actively campaigned to retake the mainland from his base on Taiwan, and even sent military missions across the Strait to attack mainland sites. He forbade all contact between the citizens of Taiwan and family members on the mainland.

Taiwanese politics changed dramatically after Chiang

Kai-shek and his son and successor, Chiang Ching-kuo, died, in 1975 and 1988 respectively. Taiwanese natives succeeded them, first President Lee Teng-hui and then President Chen Shui-bian, both of whom were determined to create a new Taiwan with its own identity, separate from China. Lee was less radical and more cautious in his dealings with China. For example, he established a National Unification Council on 23 February 1991. Lee also established a semiofficial body, the Strait Exchange Foundation (SEF) to make direct contact with China’s Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits (ARATS). During Lee’s administration, millions of Taiwanese were permitted to visit China, invest in businesses on the mainland, and establish permanent residences in China. Trade prospered, especially for the Taiwanese. Chen, on the other hand, wanted nothing to do with China and actively promoted a pro-independence political agenda. Relations deteriorated, Taiwan’s economy suffered, and at times it seemed that military conflict was imminent.

President Ma Ying-jeou (elected 2008) promoted the idea of closer ties with the mainland in his campaign and insisted there would be no war with China. After his inauguration, he immediately began encouraging the most open trade policies and travel arrangements for mainland and Taiwanese citizens across the Strait since 1949; direct flights from Beijing to Taipei resumed in July 2008.

Cross-Strait relations, however, still pose security issues for both U.S. and Japanese regional security strategies. Many American conservative and “neo-con” groups do not want to see closer ties between Taiwan, a democracy, and the nondemocratic People’s Republic of China. As for the Japanese, some politicians fear the implications

of Taiwan-China integration, either in economic or political terms, as they feel it threatens Japan's position of power in East Asia. Also, Japan's industries rely almost completely on overseas energy sources, which must pass through the Taiwan Strait and which Japan does not want to see fall into China's hands; nor does Japan want China to be able to control Japan's energy resources. Thus the political atmosphere surrounding the Taiwan Strait will continue to be an issue fraught with tension in the twenty-first century. China is planning to build a tunnel to connect the mainland with Taiwan in twenty years. This Chinese version of the Chunnel (the tunnel under the English Channel connecting England and France) may bring increased economic cultural ties or increased conflicts.

Even more recently, cross-strait relations have been improved by increasing dialogue and the election of more unification-minded politicians in Taiwan. Limited direct flights and trade has resumed between the island and

the mainland, and political exchanges are reaching new heights of cooperation and conciliation.

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### Further Reading

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