

# **Undercurrent in Taiwan: Nationalism and Calculation of the cross-strait Relations (2002-2022)**

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## **Abstract**

Literature highlights the conflicting trends between rising nationalism and stable preferences on Cross-Strait relations in Taiwan. This article unveils new insights from the *Taiwan National Security Survey* (2002-2022, 14 waves, n = 16,494) to unravel this incompatibility. The survey employed “conditional preference” items to capture how Taiwanese people shape their Cross-Strait attitudes. Since 2002, Taiwanese identifiers have increased steadily, while dual identifiers have decreased. Most respondents still prefer the status quo, but there is a gradual rise in support for independence. Hypothetical scenarios reveal that a majority support independence if China will not attack, and oppose unification if China and Taiwan differ economically and politically. Furthermore, the percentage supporting independence given China will attack is increasing, while the percentage supporting unification if China and Taiwan are similar has considerably decreased. Conditional preferences are influenced by perceived economic benefits from China and the military strength of China, Taiwan, and the US.

## Introduction

More than a decade ago, Sobel et al. (2010) explores the public opinion in Taiwan on cross-strait relations through academic and commercial surveys between 1992 and 2008. During this period, the majority of Taiwanese supported the status quo as their preferred cross-strait stance and identified themselves dually as both Chinese and Taiwanese. Meanwhile, they highlighted an emerging trend on the percentage of exclusive Taiwanese identifiers and, to a less extent, the percentage of independence supporters.

One puzzle emerging from Sobel et al. (2010)'s piece is the incompatibility between soaring nationalism in Taiwan and the majority preference for maintaining the status quo. In their Table 2, about 55% to 65% of Taiwanese respondents always chose to maintain the status quo between 1992 and 2008. In the same period, the number of exclusive Taiwanese identifier raised from 17% to 44% (in their Table 1); over 57% reported that they felt hostility from PRC toward the ROC government (in their Table 8); over 70% rejected the “One Country, Two Systems” proposal made by the PRC government (in their Table 9); over 55% supported to develop ties with other countries even though it might lead cross-strait tension (in their Table 5). In short, with more citizens choosing to identity as Taiwanese only and perceived hostility from the PRC, one should expect that the level of supporting Taiwan's independence would surpass the percentage favoring the status quo. The increasing nationalism had worried many scholars as a time bomb in the Taiwan strait (e.g. Wu 2004; Saunders 2005). However, not only in Sobel et al. (2010) but even to this day, the status quo remains the most majority position, why?

We try to answer this puzzle. We do so by introducing and sharing the results from the *Taiwan National Security Survey* (TNSS hereafter, 2002 – 2022, 14 waves, n = 16494).<sup>1</sup> TNSS is

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<sup>1</sup> <https://sites.duke.edu/tnss/> Access: April 9, 2023

designed and sponsored by Duke University and is implemented through representative landline survey by the National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan (The details of survey information is in Appendix Table A1). TNSS incorporates rational and game-theoretical designs to probe public preference of cross-Strait relations with the following three factors: (1) economic benefit, (2) relative military strength, and (3) US intervention.<sup>2</sup> These three factors help contextualize and improve our understandings of how Taiwanese respondents balance their rising nationalism with the pursuit of independence, and reveal the undercurrent of the public perception of cross-strait relations in Taiwan.

We mainly focus on the periods after the second and third Taiwanese presidential turnovers in 2008 and 2016, respectively – after Sobel et al. (2010)’s data collection. The conservative party Kuomintang returned to power in 2008, encountered significant opposition from the *Sunflower Movement* in 2014 while witnessing the *Umbrella Movement* in Hong Kong nearby, and was defeated by the China-skeptical Democratic Progressive Party in 2016.

In the following, we will discuss the distributions of identities among citizens in different times in Taiwan, before introducing the puzzle of why the status quo as an political option remains the favorite even as more citizens now identity themselves as Taiwanese only. We argue that citizens’ preferences on cross-strait relations are “conditional” on two realms: economic ties and military threats from China. We then used these two factors to elucidate citizens’ considerations explain why after nearly two decades, the status quo is the top choice for citizens.

### **Stable Cross-Strait Preference amid Rising Taiwanese Identity after 2008**

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<sup>2</sup> See Niou (2004) and Hsieh and Niou (2005) on the initial design of TNSS.

Table 1 and Figure 1 show the distribution of Taiwanese, Chinese, and both identifiers in the 14 waves of TNSS. All results in this article are unweighted. In Sobel et al. (2010), the last wave (12/2007) had 44% of citizens choosing to identify as Taiwanese only and another 45% were dual identifiers of both Taiwanese and Chinese; in comparison, there are more both identifiers (56%) and fewer Taiwanese identifiers (40%) in TNSS2008, possibly because of the winning of KMT in 2008 (Wang et al. 2023). Nevertheless, since 2008, the percentage of exclusive Taiwanese identifiers steadily increase, which serves as the indicator of rising nationalism (Chu and Lin 2001, Sobel 2010 et al., Wang 2017).<sup>3</sup> After 2008, the percentage of exclusive Taiwanese identifiers raised from 40% to 60% -- a 20% increase. Meanwhile, dual identifiers dropped 20% in the same period.

In the most recent wave in December 2022, the percentage of exclusive Taiwanese identifiers reaches 60.0% while dual identifiers account for only 36%.

Table 1: Do you consider yourself “Taiwanese,” “Chinese,” or “Both”?				
Survey Date	N	Chinese only	Both	Taiwanese only
2002.12	1225	8.9%	59.4%	31.7%
2004.05	1484	6.3%	56.7%	36.9%
2005.05	1221	6.8%	54.5%	38.7%
2008.02	1076	4.2%	55.9%	39.9%
2011.02	1104	3.0%	47.1%	49.9%
2012.1	1075	3.8%	44.8%	51.3%
2013.11	1103	4.7%	41.6%	53.7%
2014.12	1091	5.0%	38.2%	56.7%
2015.1	1071	4.9%	40.5%	54.6%
2016.11	1069	4.5%	40.1%	55.4%
2017.11	1244	4.1%	47.7%	48.2%
2019.01	1120	3.6%	49.5%	47.0%
2020.1	1110	3.3%	40.2%	56.5%
2022.12	1501	4.4%	35.6%	60.0%
Source: TNSS 2002 - 2022, <a href="https://sites.duke.edu/tnss/">https://sites.duke.edu/tnss/</a> Access: April 9, 2023				

<sup>3</sup> For the discussion on the decline of exclusive Taiwanese identity between 2016 and 2020, see Wang et al. (2023).

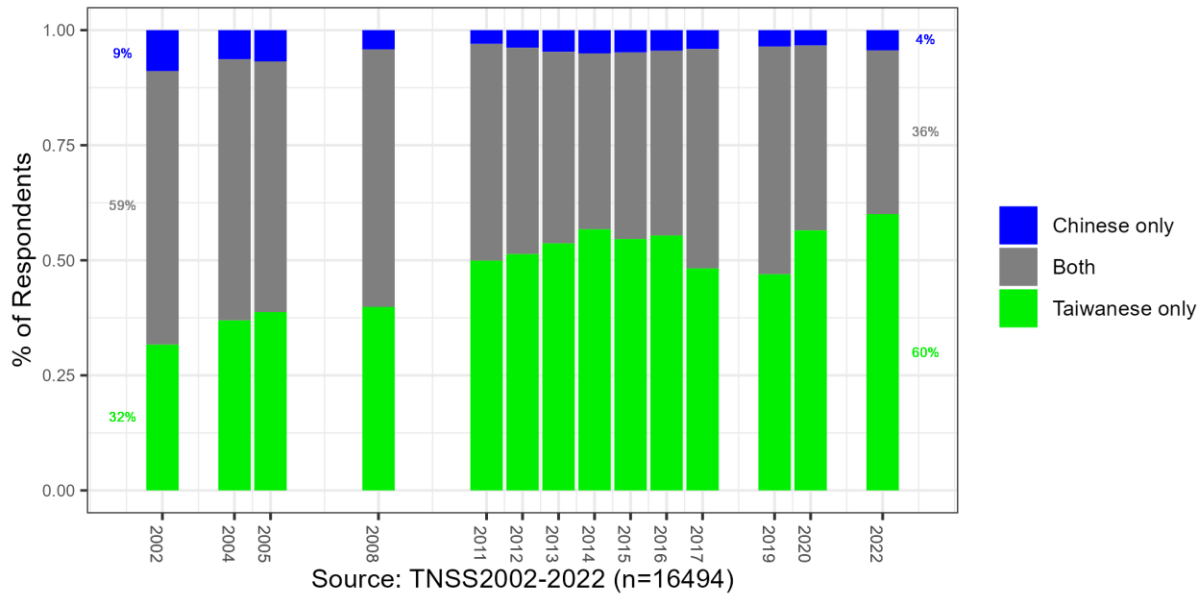


Figure 1. Do you consider yourself “Taiwanese,” “Chinese,” or “Both”?

Similarly, Table 2 and Figure 2 show the distributions of the classic six-type unification-independence preference (Achen and Wang 2017), commonly used to understand public support for Taiwan’s political future. In Sobel et al. (2010)’s last wave in 2008, 64% supported the status quo option (status quo forever + status quo and then decide in the future), 23% selected independence (independence immediately + status quo and move toward independence), and 13% chose unification (unification immediately + status quo and move toward unification). Their distribution is very similar to the results of TNSS2008 in Table 2. After 2008, support for status quo still accounts for more than 60% of all respondents, while independence supporters mildly increase to 29% and unification supporters decline to 8% in 2022. A puzzle then emerges: the mild change in the distribution of cross-Strait political preference is incompatible with the dramatic

shift in the percentage of citizens that see themselves as Taiwanese only. Why rapidly growing nationalism does not translate into significantly higher support for independence?

Table 2. Concerning the relationship between Taiwan and mainland China, which of these six positions do you agree with:						
Survey Date	N	Immediate unification	Maintain the status quo, moving toward unification in the future	(Status quo forever) AND (Status quo and decide in the future)	Maintain the status quo, moving toward independence in the future	Immediate independence
2002.12	1225	2.9%	21.6%	60.3%	12.2%	3.0%
2004.05	1484	1.3%	13.2%	65.1%	16.5%	3.9%
2005.05	1221	1.4%	15.9%	61.6%	15.6%	5.5%
2008.02	1076	1.9%	11.2%	64.6%	15.7%	6.7%
2011.02	1104	1.4%	8.0%	67.8%	18.5%	4.4%
2012.10	1075	1.8%	8.7%	67.2%	16.7%	5.6%
2013.11	1103	1.5%	10.2%	64.9%	18.4%	5.0%
2014.12	1091	1.2%	7.0%	68.8%	17.7%	5.3%
2015.10	1071	0.7%	7.8%	69.5%	18.8%	3.3%
2016.11	1069	1.6%	10.9%	64.3%	19.6%	3.7%
2017.11	1244	1.8%	15.8%	65.8%	14.5%	2.0%
2019.01	1120	2.1%	12.9%	63.1%	15.3%	6.5%
2020.10	1110	1.2%	6.8%	66.3%	20.5%	5.3%
2022.12	1501	1.4%	6.6%	63.3%	22.9%	5.8%
Source: TNSS 2002 - 2022, <a href="https://sites.duke.edu/tnss/">https://sites.duke.edu/tnss/</a> Access: April 9, 2023						

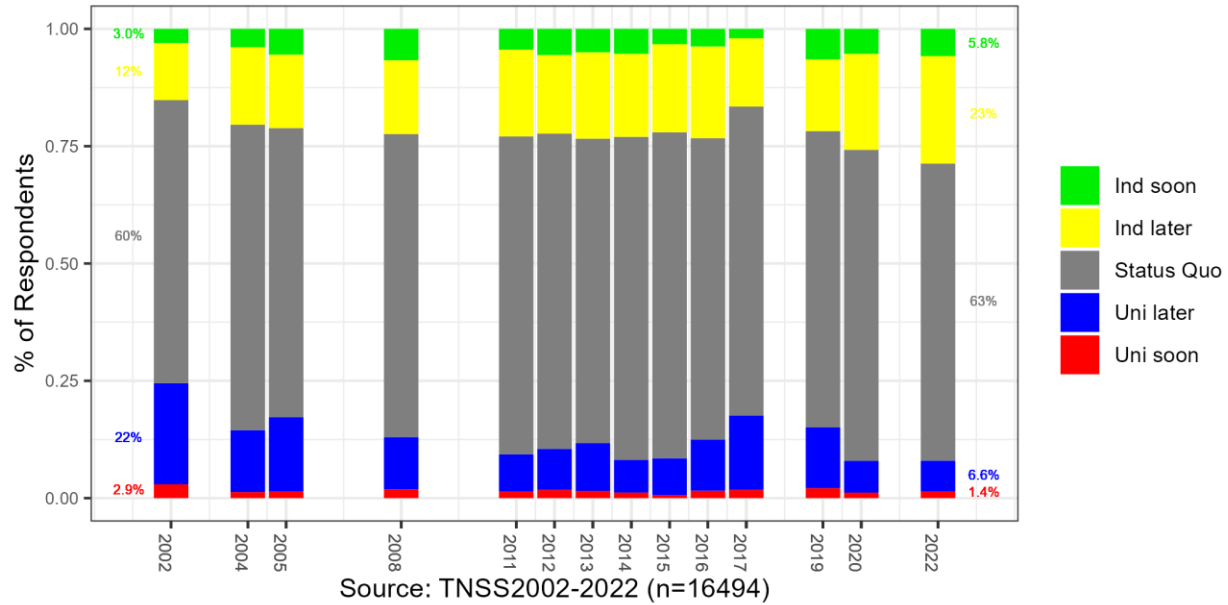


Figure 2: Concerning the relationship between Taiwan and mainland China, which of these six positions do you agree with:

### The Conditional Cross-strait Preference between 2002 and 2022

People do not make political decisions in a vacuum. Compared with the status quo, options like independence and unification bring additional costs and benefits to Taiwanese respondents. These costs and benefits often have to do with the potential military and economic responses from China and the United States. To understand varying contexts, Niou (2004) designs four hypothetical scenarios designed in the TNSS surveys to capture Taiwanese respondents' underlying cross-strait preferences, shown in Table 3 and Figure 3 below.

Survey Date	N	Do you support Taiwan independence if ...		Do you support unification if two sides...	
		China will attack after the declaration? Agree/Strongly Agree (%)	China will NOT attack after the declaration? Agree/Strongly Agree (%)	are NOT compatible in economy, society, and politics? Agree/Strongly Agree (%)	are compatible in economy, society, and politics? Agree/Strongly Agree (%)
2002.12	1225	22.8%	64.7%	20.8%	55.5%
2004.05	1484	23.9%	65.1%	13.3%	44.9%

2005.05	1221	24.6%	63.5%	15.2%	49.1%
2008.02	1076	24.0%	65.5%	16.5%	46.0%
2011.02	1104	30.4%	74.1%	16.4%	36.4%
2012.10	1075	29.5%	70.3%	14.2%	33.3%
2013.11	1103	35.3%	74.4%	17.8%	29.8%
2014.12	1091	33.5%	69.5%	15.5%	29.3%
2015.10	1071	30.4%	67.4%	15.2%	25.4%
2016.11	1069	29.0%	66.6%	17.7%	30.0%
2017.11	1244	24.8%	58.1%	24.5%	35.2%
2019.01	1120	27.6%	61.0%	24.0%	34.1%
2020.10	1110	34.6%	69.0%	13.4%	28.6%
2022.12	1501	35.9%	71.7%	13.5%	26.8%

Source: TNSS 2002 - 2022, <https://sites.duke.edu/tnss/> Access: April 9, 2023

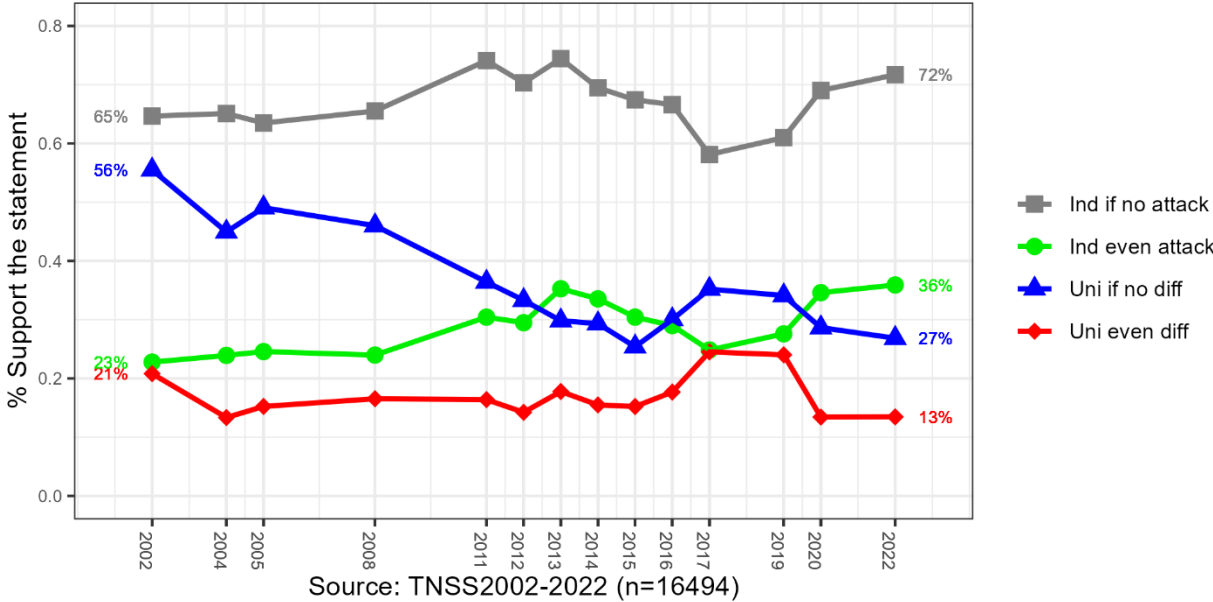


Figure 3. Do you support Taiwan independence or unification under different conditions

The major difference between the conditional preference in Table 3 and the classic six-type measure in Table 2 is the percentage of citizens supporting independence. From 2002, over 60% of Taiwanese support independence under the condition that China will not attack Taiwan. At least half of these independence supporters chose the two independence options (Column 6 and 7) in



the six-type measure, indicating that a potential Chinese military attack could reduce support for independence by about 30%.

A second observation is that between 2002 and 2022, there is about a 29% decline in “supporting unification if two sides are compatible” and a 13% increase in “supporting independence even China will attack”. Both shifts in Table 3 and Figure 3 are compatible with the surging nationalism during the same period in Table 1, and help reveal the underlying calculations of the stable status quo majority in Table 2. In 2002, the majority of Taiwanese identified themselves as both Chinese and Taiwanese – since independence may cause a war and unification is not attractive enough (because the two sides were incompatible), they preferred the status quo. In 2022, the majority of respondents identified themselves as Taiwanese only. Although the majority still preferred the status quo, unification gradually became out of the question – no matter if the two sides are compatible or not. The rising nationalism strengthens the ingroup/outgroup boundary between Taiwanese and Chinese people. The compositions of the majority of the status quo are drastically different between 2002 and 2022.

### **Economic Calculations of Conditional Cross-Strait Preferences**

The clear gaps between the two conditional independence preferences and the two conditional unification preferences highlight the two factors behind citizens’ calculation: economic benefit and military threat from China. Although these two factors may not dampen rising nationalism (Wang 2017), they might influence the relationship between nationalism and support for independence.

Table 4 and Figure 4 show the percentage of respondents seeking more economic ties with China (in column 3), worried that China will exploit the economic ties for political gain (in column

4, asked in TNSS since 2012), and agreeing with both statements (column 5). China has been Taiwan’s largest trading partner since 2012, so it is unsurprising that a considerable proportion of respondents wanted a strong economic tie with China.

Meanwhile, around 60% of respondents worried that China would exploit the economic ties for political gain, as one of China’s strategies for reunification is “promoting reunification through economic cooperation (*yi jin tsu tong*)”. Interestingly, there is a considerable overlap between those who wants more economic ties with China and are worried about China’s economic coercion, as shown in the fifth column in Table 4 and the gray line in Figure 4.

Table 4. Attitude on enhancing economic cooperation with China				
Survey Date	N	In Taiwan, some people believe that we should strengthen the economic tie with Mainland China, and some people believe that we should loosen the economic tie. Which side do you agree with? Strengthen (%)	Some people say that if Taiwan’s economy relies too heavily on China, China will use the economic tie to coerce Taiwan into making political concessions in the future. Do you agree with the statement? Agree/Strongly agree (%)	Percentage of respondents who Agree/Strongly agree on both questions in the left columns
2002.12	1225	33.1%	NA	NA
2004.05	1484	54.8%	NA	NA
2005.05	1221	51.4%	NA	NA
2008.02	1076	63.1%	NA	NA
2011.02	1104	45.2%	NA	NA
2012.1	1075	44.5%	62.1%	23.6%
2013.11	1103	41.4%	64.4%	22.4%
2014.12	1091	41.1%	58.9%	18.4%
2015.1	1071	45.1%	61.9%	22.9%
2016.11	1069	55.7%	59.7%	29.9%
2017.11	1244	62.2%	53.8%	30.5%
2019.01	1120	55.8%	56.0%	26.3%
2020.1	1110	43.2%	56.9%	17.7%
2022.12	1501	43.7%	58.4%	18.1%

Source: TNSS 2002 - 2022, <https://sites.duke.edu/tnss/> Access: April 9, 2023

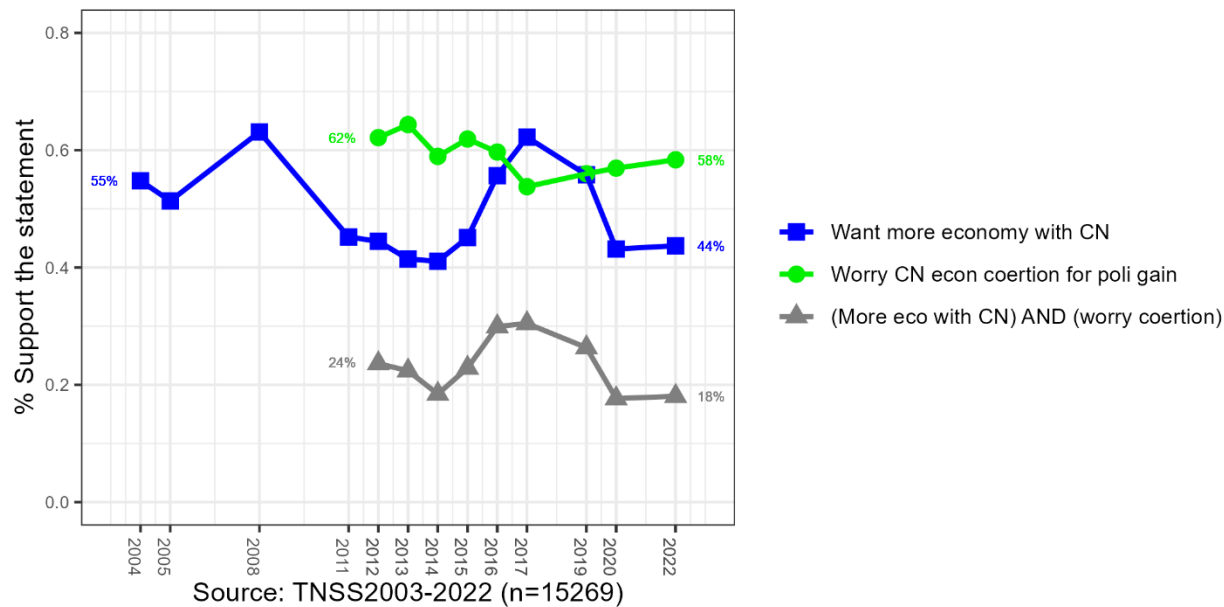


Figure 4. Attitude on enhancing economic cooperation with China

### Military Threat and Its Impact on Conditional Cross-strait Preferences

Table 5 and Figure 5 present how Taiwanese respondents perceived the four actors in the potential China-Taiwan military conflict – China, United States, Taiwanese army, and Taiwanese people. Between 2002 and 2022, about 50% to 65% of Taiwanese respondents believed that China will attack Taiwan once Taiwan declares independence (Column 3 in Table 5 and the green line in Figure 5). This explains the gap between support for conditional and unconditional independence in Table 3. Meanwhile, about 40% to 60% of respondents believed that the United States will help Taiwan (Column 5 in Table 5 and the blue line in Figure 5).

year	N	If Taiwan declares independence, do you think that China will attack Taiwan?	If China attacks Taiwan, do you think that our military is capable of defending Taiwan along?	If Taiwan declared independence and then China attacked, do you think the US will deploy troops to help Taiwan?	If the war between Taiwan and China begins, do you think the majority of Taiwan citizens will resist the invasion?
2002.12	1225	66.2%	NA	47.2%	66.4%
2004.05	1484	63.5%	19.5%	64.9%	68.0%

2005.05	1221	64.9%	12.0%	52.8%	56.9%
2008.02	1076	59.3%	11.6%	47.8%	66.0%
2011.02	1104	58.4%	10.3%	59.8%	70.8%
2012.10	1075	56.9%	8.9%	56.7%	62.2%
2013.11	1103	60.4%	9.3%	56.5%	65.2%
2014.12	1091	49.7%	9.3%	60.7%	67.6%
2015.10	1071	56.7%	10.1%	58.3%	59.9%
2016.11	1069	60.0%	10.9%	47.3%	61.3%
2017.11	1244	45.3%	11.5%	39.1%	49.9%
2019.01	1120	53.7%	19.2%	48.3%	59.4%
2020.10	1110	65.4%	30.5%	51.4%	69.7%
2022.12	1501	68.2%	26.3%	NA	63.9%

Source: TNSS 2002 - 2022, <https://sites.duke.edu/tnss/> Access: April 9, 2023

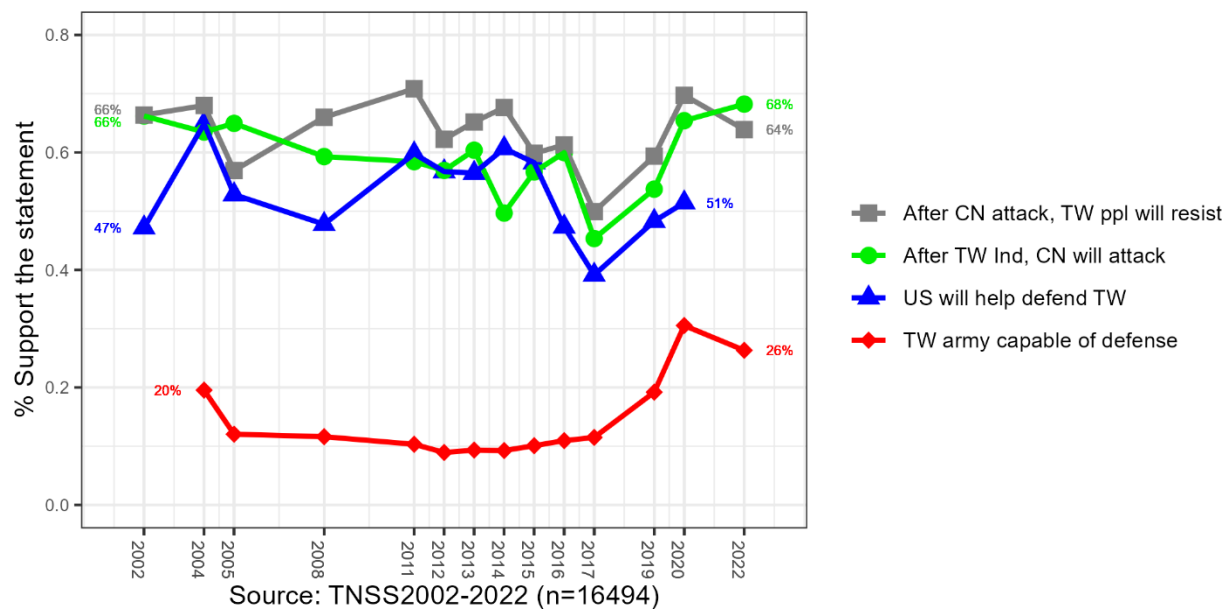


Figure 5. Attitude on relative military strength between China and Taiwan

Interestingly, there is a clear gap between perceived willingness to fight and the capacity to fight. Around 65% of Taiwanese people believed that the majority of Taiwanese people will fight against the invasion of China between 2002 and 2022. Meanwhile, only 10% of Taiwanese respondents believed that Taiwanese army is able to defend the invasion from China, but the percentage increased to 30% after 2020.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis of the 14 waves of TNSS survey provides clear answers to explain why most Taiwanese citizens still favor the status quo (Table 2) amidst rising nationalism (Table 1). Looking deeper into the considerations of the status quo majority would reveal that, before 2008, most citizens have dual identities of both Taiwanese and Chinese – both unification and independence were acceptable options (Table 3). But unification is costly due to economic and social disparities across the Strait (Table 3) while declaring independence could spark a war (Table 5).

The considerations are different after exclusive Taiwanese identifiers became the majority in 2011 (Table 1), since then, citizens of Taiwan gradually find unification unacceptable (Table 3). Rising nationalism leads to a small but incremental increase in support toward independence (Table 2), even unconditionally (Table 3). With these considerations, the status quo option still remains the majority preference as people believe that declaring independence would incur China's wrath (Table 5) since they still need to rely on China for economic development (Table 4). The above considerations lead Taiwanese citizens to believe that declaring independence is not worth the trouble and maintaining the status quo is an unsatisfying but acceptable option (Table 2). It also could be possible that some Taiwanese citizens may further consider that Taiwan (under the name of Republic of China) was already independent, so the status quo is good enough and no further declaration is necessary. Future work may focus on distinguishing different perceptions of status quo and independence.



## Appendix

Wave	Date	N and Method	Institution	Response rate
2002	Dec 27-30, 2002	1225 RDD landline	Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan	NA
2004	May 1-8, 2004	1484 RDD landline	Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan	NA
2005	May 27-31, 2005	1221 RDD landline	Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan	NA
2008	Feb 23-25, 2008	1076 RDD landline	Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan	NA
2011	Feb 24-27, 2011	1104 RDD landline	Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan	RR1 8.7%
2012	Oct 22-29, 2012	1075 RDD landline	Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan	RR1 6.8%
2013	Nov 6-11, 2013	1103 RDD landline	Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan	RR1 8.5%
2014	Dec 26-30, 2014	1091 RDD landline	Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan	RR1 8.3f%
2015	Oct 27-Nov 3, 2015	1071 RDD landline	Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan	RR1 6.7%
2016	Nov 18-22, 2016	1069 RDD landline	Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan	RR1 6.7%
2017	Nov 29-Dec 5, 2017	1244 RDD landline	Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan	RR1 6.7%
2019	Jan 3-7, 2019	1120 RDD landline	Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan	RR1 8.6%
2020	Oct 27-31, 2020	1110 RDD landline	Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan	RR1 7.0%
2022	Dec 9-14, 2022	1200 RDD landline 301 RDD cellphone	Taiwan Real Survey, Taipei, Taiwan	RR1 4.3% RR1 6.5%

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