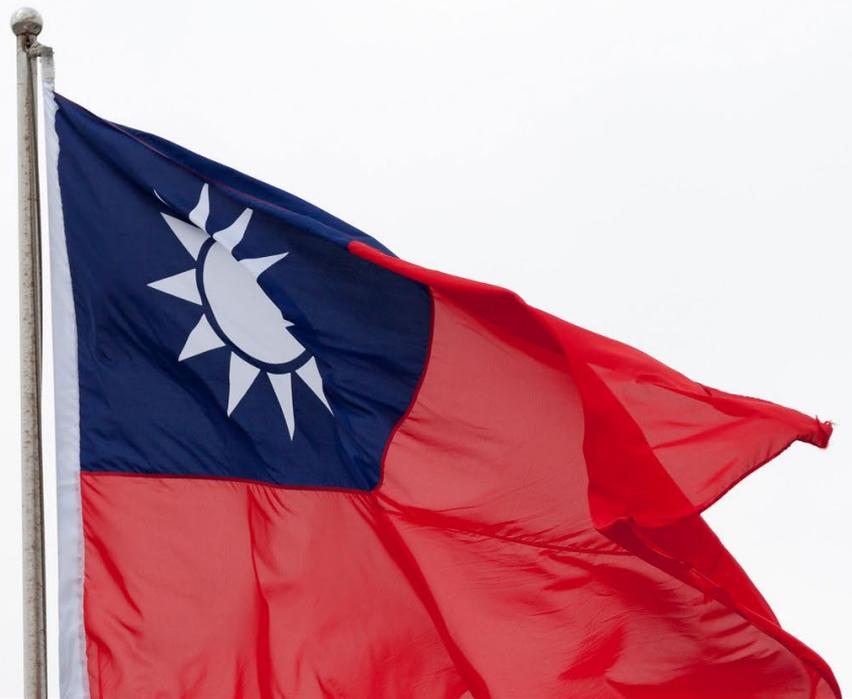


Research Briefing

28 March 2024

By John Curtis

Taiwan: History, politics and UK relations



Summary

- 1 Taiwan's history and domestic politics
- 2 International recognition of Taiwan and membership of international organisations
- 3 Taiwan's relations with the United Kingdom

Number

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Contents

Summary	4
1 Taiwan's history and domestic politics	7
1.1 History of Taiwan	7
1.2 Domestic politics	10
1.3 2022 local elections	12
1.4 2024 Presidential and parliamentary elections	12
2 International recognition of Taiwan and membership of international organisations	16
2.1 International recognition of Taiwan	16
2.2 Taiwan's membership of international organisations	17
2.3 UK policy on recognition of Taiwan	20
3 Taiwan's relations with the United Kingdom	22
3.1 Diplomatic relations	22
3.2 Defence relations	23
3.3 UK-Taiwan trade statistics and relations	25

Summary

Taiwan is an island in the South China Sea, around 100 miles off the coast of China, on which [nearly 24 million people live](#). The Communist-controlled People's Republic of China, based on mainland China, considers Taiwan a breakaway province that must return to the mainland's control.

According to [Taiwan's constitution](#) its official name is the Republic of China. This is a remnant of a political entity formed on the Chinese mainland more than 100 years ago. The Republic of China does not officially recognise the People's Republic, and its constitution still asserts sovereignty over mainland China.

The People's Republic of China's 'One China' principle asserts that Taiwan is an integral part of China, and as part of this, that other countries must only maintain official diplomatic relations with itself. It also opposes Taiwan's participation in international organisations.

The UK, like most other countries, does not recognise Taiwan as a state, nor does it maintain formal diplomatic relations with the island.

This briefing looks at Taiwan's history and politics, membership of international organisations, and relationship with other states, including the UK.

Taiwan's politics and approach to the mainland

Taiwan was a military dictatorship for several decades, and martial law was imposed between 1949 and 1987. From that period through the 1990s Taiwan transitioned to democracy, holding its first direct presidential elections in 1996.

[The UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office describes Taiwan](#) as a "stable, vibrant democracy with a free press and independent judiciary".

Taiwan's current President is Tsai Ing-wen, of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), her term ends in May 2024. Presidential and parliamentary elections were held in January 2024, and DPP candidate, current Vice President William Lai Ching-te, won the contest, a third consecutive victory for the DPP. The DPP did support declaring formal independence for Taiwan in the 1990s. But now, particularly under the leadership of Tsai Ing-wen, it supports the status-quo [stating that Taiwan is already independent as the Republic of China](#) (PDF). Lai is [not expected to change this approach](#).

The other main political party, the Kuomintang (KMT), still formally supports the Republic of China's sovereignty over the whole of China. When in power over the last few decades, it has generally sought to defuse tensions with the People's Republic of China, however, and build economic and social ties with the mainland.

International recognition of Taiwan

Only 12 nations recognise Taiwan as a state and have formal diplomatic ties with it. The UK is part of the majority that do not. In recent years, the People's Republic of China has been putting [countries that have diplomatic relations with Taiwan](#) under greater pressure to break ties.

Countries and international organisations will often refer to Taiwan officially by the name of its capital, Taipei, or sometimes Chinese Taipei.

UK-Taiwan relations

The [UK Government says](#) the dispute between Taiwan and the People's Republic of China should be resolved "through dialogue, in line with the views of the people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait". It has no plans to recognise Taiwan as a state. The UK does support Taiwan's participation in international organisations as an observer.

The UK's diplomatic presence on the island is maintained through an outpost called the British Office Taipei.

Relations between the UK and Taiwan have strengthened over the last few years. Part of the reason is the UK's foreign policy aim to "[tilt to the Indo-Pacific](#)" set out in the 2021 Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy.

[The UK has in recent years sent its warships on operations in the waters around Taiwan, which has angered China.](#) The UK has, however, ruled out providing military assistance to Taiwan.

The issue on which the Taiwan and UK most regularly engage is trade, and the two sides have held annual ministerial trade talks since 1991. In July 2023, [the UK Department for Business and Trade official talks on an Enhanced Trade Partnership would start "in due course"](#). This will not be a full free trade agreement but will instead be supported by political agreements called 'memoranda of understanding'.

Further reading

For more on Taiwan see Library research briefings:

- [Taiwan: Relations with China](#)
- [Taiwan: Relations with the United States](#)

1 Taiwan's history and domestic politics

1.1 History of Taiwan

Taiwan's complex history explains its fraught relations with the People's Republic of China, and why so few countries have diplomatic relations with the Island.

Early history to the Chinese Civil War

Taiwan's indigenous people are ethnic Malays from Southeast Asia, whose ancestors migrated to the island thousands of years ago.¹

The island seems to have first appeared in Chinese records in AD239, when an emperor sent an expeditionary force to explore the area – something Beijing uses to back its territorial claim.²

Other cultural groups include the Hakka, and the majority Hoklo. Both originated from mainland China and are ethnically Han-Chinese. The Hakka have a distinct language and culture and originated in northern China, but then moved south to Guangdong and Fujian provinces. The Hoklo came from Fujian province. In the 17th Century both the Hakka and Hoklo migrated in large numbers to Taiwan.³

Europeans named the island Formosa, and this was the name many European countries used for the island until the mid-20th Century.

After a few decades as a Dutch colony (1624-1661), Taiwan was administered by China's Qing dynasty from 1683 to 1895. However, the Qing Empire's control of the island was fairly loose, and it wasn't until 1885 that Taiwan was incorporated as a full province of China, after more settlers from the mainland moved there.

Ten years later, in 1895, the Qing Empire was forced to cede control of Taiwan to Japan, after it was defeated in the first Sino-Japanese war.⁴

¹ J Manthorpe, *Forbidden Nation: A History of Taiwan*, 2009, pp xi-xii.

² "[What's behind the China-Taiwan divide?](#)", BBC News, 26 May 2021.

³ J Manthorpe, *Forbidden Nation: A History of Taiwan*, 2009, pp xi-xii

⁴ Sovereignty was ceded in perpetuity to Japan under the Treaty of Shimonoseki of 1895.

In mainland China, a revolution in 1911 brought down the Qing dynasty. A new Republic of China was formed in 1912. One of the leaders of the 1911 revolution was Sun Yat-sen, who founded the Kuomintang (Nationalist Party of China) and was briefly the Republic's President. The Republic struggled to maintain control of China, with warlords taking over swathes of territory. Another challenge to its authority was the Communist Party of China, founded in 1921. Tensions between the Communists and the Kuomintang-led Republic of China Government led to the start of a civil war in 1927.

Chinese Civil War and Second World War

The Chinese Civil War between the Kuomintang-led Nationalist Government and the Communists continued until 1937, when Japan invaded mainland China, in a conflict called the Second Sino-Japanese War. The Kuomintang and the Communists agreed to a truce to both fight the Japanese forces.

In 1943 at the [Cairo Conference](#), President Roosevelt of the US and UK Prime Minister Winston Churchill met with Republic of China President and Kuomintang leader President Chiang Kai-shek. They agreed that territories taken from China by Japan, including Manchuria and Taiwan, would be returned to the control of the Republic of China after Japan was defeated (the Allied forces of the Second World War had been fighting Japan in the Pacific region since December 1941).⁵

Taiwan returned to China and civil war resumes

After the Japanese surrender at the end of World War Two, the Republic of China Government took back control of the island of Taiwan.

The end of the war also saw the Communists and Kuomintang resume hostilities. The Republic suspended some of the elements of its new constitution, such as Presidential term limits, in what were called “temporary provisions” to deal with the emergency of the Civil War. These temporary provisions were kept and used by the Republic of China to maintain the Kuomintang's later rule in Taiwan.

In 1947 large numbers of Republic troops were dispatched from mainland China to suppress a large-scale uprising of Taiwan residents, upset at the violent conduct of soldiers already stationed there and other issues such as official corruption. Thousands were killed in the crackdown. This is known as the ‘228 incident’ after the date it occurred, the 28 February.⁶

⁵ China joined the Allied Powers formally in December 1941, a few days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and its invasion of British colonies in the Indo-Pacific, when it signed a declaration of war against Japan, Germany and Italy. To some extent, therefore, the Second Sino-Japanese War that was fought from 1937-45 between China and Japan “merged” with the Pacific theatre of the Second World War. Both conflicts came to an end with the defeat of Japan in 1945.

⁶ [“Taiwan’s White Terror: Remembering the 228 incident”](#), Foreign Policy Research Institute, Thomas Shattuck, 27 February 2017.

Kuomintang defeated by Communists and retreat to Taiwan

In 1949 after military defeat by Communist forces, the Republic of China government, led by Chiang Kai-shek, retreated and relocated to Taiwan. Over the next several years 1.2 million people from mainland China fled to the Island. On 1 October 1949, Mao Zedong, Chairman of the Communist Party, formally declared the establishment of the People's Republic of China.

Martial law declared and domination by mainlanders

Martial law was declared in Taiwan in 1949 and continued in force until 1987. The Kuomintang justified the use of this power by saying it was necessary because of the threat of invasion by Communist forces.

The Republic of China continued to see itself as the legitimate government of the whole of China and refused to recognise the People's Republic. Republic of China officials continued to represent China at international organisations like the UN, and, at first, few countries recognised the People's Republic.

Most of the politicians elected to represent China's mainland provinces in 1947-48 relocated to Taiwan with the Kuomintang Government. These mainland representatives continued to sit in the legislature and had their legislative terms extended indefinitely, with the Kuomintang Government saying fresh elections would be held when they retook China.

Most positions in the Republic Government were held by Chinese mainlanders, and this elite controlled the civil service and military.⁷

Thousands of political dissidents were imprisoned in the early 1950s, ostensibly to crackdown on Communist "spies", however the arrests targeted almost anyone who might pose a threat to the Kuomintang regime. The years of authoritarian control in Taiwan are known as the "[white terror](#)".⁸

Chiang Kai-shek ruled unchallenged as an effective dictator, until his death in 1975. He oversaw a few decades of very high economic growth as Taiwan rapidly industrialised.

Move towards democracy and 'Taiwanisation'

In the 1970's the Kuomintang made a greater effort to include Taiwan natives in the party, though it took some time for them to achieve senior positions. It also made some limited democratic reforms.

⁷ K Maguire, *The Rise of Modern Taiwan*, 1998, pp 110-11.

⁸ The White Terror period is sometimes said to have started with the "[228 massacre](#)", in February 1947, and continued till martial law was ended in 1987. Though there was a particularly concentrated period of arrests of dissidents in the 1950's.

In 1969 elections started to be held for Taiwan's legislative bodies.⁹ However, these elections were only for a small number of seats, and opposition parties were banned, so non-Kuomintang candidates could only stand as independents. Elected representatives were outnumbered by unelected life members.

Chiang Kai-shek's son Chiang Ching-kuo took over the running of the Kuomintang. Chiang Ching-kuo became Premier in 1972 and President in 1978. Although also effectively President-for-life, he did not, according to political scientist Professor Dafydd Fell "try to construct a personality cult in the way that his father had done, and decision-making became more collective".¹⁰

During this period, however, the Kuomintang maintained complete control of the state and mainstream media.¹¹

The move to democracy finally achieved significant momentum in the 1980's. The ban on opposition parties was lifted in 1986, and in 1987 martial law was ended.

In 1991, competitive elections for the majority (but not all) seats in the National Assembly were held for the first time. All the surviving mainland-elected delegates were obliged to finally relinquish their seats. In 1992 the main legislative body, the Legislative Yuan, held direct elections for all its seats for the first time. The National Assembly was later abolished.

Taiwan elected its first non-Kuomintang politician as President in 2000 when Chen Shui-bian of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) was elected.

1.2 Domestic politics

Constitution today

Taiwan has a President who serves as Head of State. Presidents are directly elected on a joint ticket with a Vice President for four-year terms and can serve two terms in total.

The President has control over foreign affairs and defence, including heading the armed forces. They appoint the Premier (Prime Minister), and the Premier advises the President on appointments to the 'Executive Yuan Council' (Cabinet) and other senior Government posts.

The Premier runs the government on a day-to-day basis and steers the domestic policy agenda.

⁹ There were two legislative bodies, the National Assembly and the Legislative Yuan at that time.

¹⁰ Dafydd Fell, [Taiwan: Recent history: Shift from Hard to Soft Authoritarianism](#), in Europa World online. Retrieved 3 August 2023.

¹¹ As above.

The Legislative Yuan, or parliament, is the unicameral legislature of Taiwan. Members are voted for four-year terms as part of the general elections that also choose the President.

Taiwan's constitution derives from the 1947 constitution of the Republic of China. The constitution has been revised repeatedly over the years, particularly since the democratic era, but it contains some original elements. This includes the name the Republic of China, and a territorial claim to mainland China.¹²

Two-party system

After the transition to democracy Taiwan settled into a two-major-party system. Though the strong performance of the third-placed Taiwan People's Party (TPP) in the January 2024 presidential and legislative elections (see section 1.4), has seen some analysts argue Taiwan might be entering into a three-party system era.¹³ The Kuomintang (KMT), was the ruling party under the period of martial law and effective dictatorship, though is now committed to democratic politics. The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) grew out of the Taiwanese democracy movement against the KMT.

In 2000 the DPP gained the Presidency for the first time, ending more than half a century of KMT rule over Taiwan. The DPP then won legislative elections the following year.

At the 2008 election, the KMT regained the Presidency and its majority in the legislature (elections for both now took place in the same years).

In the 2016 election the pendulum swung back to the DPP after they won a majority of seats in the legislature and the DPP candidate Tsai Ing-wen won the presidential election. President Tsai was re-elected in January 2020; and the DPP retained its lead in the legislature, albeit with a slightly reduced majority.

Party policies on China and Taiwanese identity

The KMT and DPP do not fit neatly into Western political conceptions of left or right.¹⁴ One of the most important dividing lines between them is their approach to China and Taiwanese identity.

The KMT's stance for most of its existence was that Taiwan was part of China, but the Republic of China Government based in Taiwan was the legitimate government of that country, not the People's Republic of China. Whilst in power in the democratic era, particularly under the Presidency of Ma Ying-

¹² It also has references to delegates from Mongolia. Taiwan only started treating Mongolia as an independent country in 2002, and the [Government claimed in 2012](#) that the constitution does not include Mongolia as part of the Republic of China's sovereign territory.

¹³ Atlantic Council: The New Atlantacist, [Lai's victory isn't the full story. Here are five deeper takeaways from Taiwan's election](#), 22 January 2024.

¹⁴ Dafydd Fell, *Government & Politics in Taiwan*, 2012, pp 84-85.

jeou (2008-16), it has also sought to ease tensions with the People's Republic of China and build up engagement with the mainland, including economic links.

The DPP has asserted that Taiwan is culturally and politically separate from mainland China. It did support declaring formal independence for Taiwan in the 1990s. But now, particularly under the leadership of Tsai Ing-wen, it asserts support for the status-quo stating that Taiwan is already independent as the Republic of China. In [its charter](#) the DPP states that any major changes to the status quo of its relationship with the People's Republic would have to be done through public referendum, but it has not advocated for such a vote in the last few decades.¹⁵

For more information on the parties' stance on China see Library's [research briefing on China and Taiwan relations](#).

1.3 2022 local elections

Taiwan held local elections at the end of November 2022. The ruling DPP party performed poorly, winning only five of 22 municipalities, which is the party's worst results in 36 years. It won six municipalities in 2018.¹⁶ It also lost several mayoral races and failed to win back the mayoral seat in the capital Taipei from the Nationalist (KMT) party. As a result, President Tsai Ing-wen resigned as head of the ruling Democratic Progressive party (DPP). This did not affect her role as President and is part of an established pattern that other Presidents have taken after similar electoral defeats.¹⁷

However, while these elections were a setback for the DPP, they were primarily about local issues, and an analysis of the election results by the Asia-focused Diplomat magazine argued "[T]he KMT's victories are not a sign that Taiwanese voters have begun to swing in a pro-China direction".¹⁸

1.4 2024 Presidential and parliamentary elections

On 13 January 2024, Taiwan held presidential and legislative elections.

¹⁵ "[No, Taiwan's President Isn't 'Pro-Independence'](#)", The Diplomat, 23 April 2020.

¹⁶ "[Once Again, KMT Scores Big in Taiwan's Local Elections](#)", The Diplomat, 28 November 2022.

¹⁷ "[Taiwan president resigns as party head after local election losses](#)", The Guardian, 26 November 2022.

¹⁸ "[Once Again, KMT Scores Big in Taiwan's Local Elections](#)", The Diplomat, 28 November 2022.

Presidential elections

The DPP won the presidential election for a landmark third consecutive term (this is the first time this has happened since direct presidential elections began in 1996). DPP candidate, current Vice President William Lai Ching-te, gained 40.1% of the vote.

The Kuomintang (KMT) candidate Hou Yu-ih received 33.5%, and Ko Wen-je of the Taiwan People's Party's (TPP) gained 26.5% of the popular vote.¹⁹

The KMT and TPP, both often described as being part of the pan-Blue coalition of parties who seek better relations with the People's Republic of China (the blue comes from the colour of the KMT flag, the opposing pan-Green coalition comes from the green of the DPP flag), discussed running a joint ticket of Presidential candidates.²⁰ However, these [negotiations broke down](#), in part according to the Diplomat magazine, because the KMT, the dominant party in Taiwan for a long period of time, could not accept "playing second fiddle to the TPP an upstart pan-Blue third party", but also because the "TPP has built its party identity in past years on the basis of being a third party that is neither DPP nor KMT, even if it hewed closer to the pan-Blue camp".²¹

Lai will be inaugurated on 20 May 2024. Incumbent President Tsai Ing-wen (who was barred by constitutional term limits from running for a third term) will remain in office until then.

In 2017, before becoming Vice President, Lai called himself a "pragmatic worker for Taiwan independence". But on the 2024 campaign trail he softened his stance and made clear he supported the current status quo.²²

Parliamentary elections

The DPP's success in the Presidential elections was not replicated in the legislative elections, where the DPP lost the parliamentary majority it had held since 2016. Out of the 113 seats in the unicameral Legislative Yuan the DPP won 51 (down 10 seats), the KMT 52 seats (up from 38), and the TPP 8 seats (an increase of 3), two independents were also elected.²³

¹⁹ Taiwan Central Election Commission, [2024 Presidential and Vice Presidential Election: Candidate Votes](#), accessed 1 March 2024.

²⁰ "[How the Taiwan Opposition Alliance Talks Fell Apart](#)", The Diplomat, 28 November 2023.

²¹ As above.

²² Council on Foreign Relations, [Taiwan's 2024 Presidential Election: Analyzing William Lai's Foreign Policy Positions](#), 20 December 2023.

²³ Taiwan Central Election Commission, [2024 Legislative Election: Electees Statistics](#), accessed 1 March 2024. For further analysis of the legislative elections see Global Taiwan Institute, Global Taiwan Brief, Vol. 9, Issue 2, [The Outcomes of Taiwan's 2024 Legislative Elections](#), 24 January 2024.

The results mean Taiwan is entering a new era of legislative politics, where a third political party – the TPP–will hold crucial leverage over the main two parties, with analysts often describing them as “kingmakers”.²⁴

Factors that have been identified as behind the DPP’s relatively poor performance in the parliamentary elections, and the rise of the TPP, include voter fatigue with the DPP, and dissatisfaction with domestic issues such as stagnant wages, high housing costs and youth unemployment.²⁵ The TPP’s greater focus on domestic issues, and Taiwan’s younger voting base’s (key TPP supporters) reported distrust for the two traditional political parties, have also been raised as reasons for the results.²⁶

Parliament chooses a KMT President (speaker)

On 1 February 2024, the Legislative Yuan elected a president and vice president. The president of the Legislative Yuan is similar to the role of a parliamentary speaker, but they also play a “crucial role in determining which bills are put up for discussion in the legislature”.²⁷

The victors were the KMT joint ticket of Han Kuo-yu (as president), the party’s candidate in the 2020 presidential elections and a “deep-Blue” nationalist figure, alongside Johnny Chiang (as vice president), a moderate who has “tried to change the pro-China image of the KMT” according to the Diplomat.²⁸

In the decisive second round of voting, Han and Chiang won 54 votes, all 52 of the KMT legislators, plus the two independents, to the DPP’s 51. Crucially the eight TPP legislators abstained from the second round of voting, after their candidate was knocked out in the first.²⁹

The Diplomat have said it is possible that the KMT will use its control of the legislature to “seek to block legislation pushed by the incoming Lai administration, on matters ranging from defence budgets to domestic infrastructure spending”.³⁰ Yeh Yao-yuan, an expert on Taiwan politics at the University of St. Thomas in Texas agreed, telling the VOA news site, “I think new policy proposals related to national defence, foreign policy or cross-strait relations will face more obstacles in the new legislature”.³¹

²⁴ See “[In Taiwan’s two-party parliamentary system, Ko Wen-je’s ‘third’ choice breaks through](#)”, Hong Kong Free Press, 3 February 2024; and the Atlantic Council, [Lai’s victory isn’t the full story. Here are five deeper takeaways from Taiwan’s election](#), 22 January 2024.

²⁵ See Global Taiwan Institute, Global Taiwan Brief, Vol. 8, Issue 11, [Three Domestic Political Variables to Watch in Taiwan’s 2024 Presidential Election](#), 31 May 2023; and Global Taiwan Institute, Global Taiwan Brief, Vol. 9, Issue 2, [The Outcomes of Taiwan’s 2024 Legislative Elections](#), 24 January 2024

²⁶ Focus Taiwan, “[ELECTION 2024/Voters backing TPP’s Ko shows distrust of DPP and KMT: Analyst](#)”, 14 January 2024.

²⁷ The Diplomat, “[KMT’s Han Kuo-yu Is Taiwan’s New Legislative Speaker](#)”, 2 February 2024.

²⁸ As above.

²⁹ As above.

³⁰ As above.

³¹ “[China-Friendly Opposition Politician Elected Legislative Speaker in Taiwan](#)”, VOA, 1 February 2024.

Chen Fang-yu, an expert on Taiwan politics at Soochow University in Taiwan told the VOA: “Whether policymaking will be seriously stalled in Taiwan for the next four years depends on how the incoming administration negotiates with the opposition parties”. He suggested the DPP should prioritise “Policies related to social welfare and long-term care” as these are “less likely to face objection from opposition parties”.³²

Chen also mentioned Han’s “track record of maintaining friendly ties with the Chinese government” and thinks Beijing may try to influence Taiwan’s domestic politics through the legislature, adding “One possible development is the Chinese government may invite Han to visit China”.³³

³² As above.

³³ [“China-Friendly Opposition Politician Elected Legislative Speaker in Taiwan”](#), VOA, 1 February 2024.

2 International recognition of Taiwan and membership of international organisations

2.1 International recognition of Taiwan

Currently only 12 countries have formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan.³⁴ That number has shrunk in recent years, in part because of pressure from China.

Since Taiwan's DPP party, which asserts a distinct Taiwanese identity and autonomy for Taiwan, returned to power in 2016, China appeared to increase pressure on the remaining countries that recognise Taiwan.³⁵ Between 2016 and 2024, 10 countries broke ties with the island:³⁶

- 2016: Sao Tome and Principe
- 2017: Panama
- 2018: Burkina Faso, Dominican Republic and El Salvador
- 2019: Kiribati and the Solomon Islands
- 2021: Nicaragua
- 2023: Honduras³⁷
- 2024: Nauru³⁸

Over the same period, China has also increased its efforts to block Taiwan from participating in international organisations (see next section).

³⁴ Taiwan's remaining allies are: Eswatini, the Holy See, the Marshall Islands, Palau, Tuvalu, Belize, Guatemala, Haiti, Paraguay, Honduras, the Federation of Saint Christopher and Nevis, St Lucia, and St Vincent and the Grenadines. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China \(Taiwan\)-Diplomatic Allies \(mofa.gov.tw\)](https://mofa.gov.tw/eng/News_Content.aspx?id=1032), accessed 3 August 2023.

³⁵ "The Economist Explains: Why Taiwan is not recognised on the international stage", The Economist, 17 May 2020.

³⁶ World Population Review, [Countries that Recognize Taiwan 2023](#), accessed 27 March 2024, this list has not been updated since 2022.

³⁷ "Honduras to switch ties from Taiwan to China, says president", The Guardian, 15 March 2023.

³⁸ "Nauru cuts diplomatic ties with Taiwan in favour of China", BBC News, 15 January 2024.

Taiwan's development into a democracy in the 1990s and fraying relations between many Western countries and China over the last several years, seems to have increased support in some of those countries for deepening ties with Taiwan, and supporting its participation in international fora.³⁹ None, however, have expressed support for establishing formal diplomatic ties or recognising Taiwan as an independent country.

All would be mindful that China would see such a move as an extreme provocation.

2.2

Taiwan's membership of international organisations

United Nations

After losing the Chinese Civil War in 1949, Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang's government continued to represent China as the Republic of China at the UN.

Disagreement grew over who was the legitimate representative of China. Initially the US managed to block efforts to recognise the People's Republic of China. However, during the 1950s and 1960s decolonisation changed the composition of the UN General Assembly, with a large number of newly independent nations from South America, Asia and Africa, supporting the People's Republic's bid to be recognised as the sole legitimate representative of China.

In December 1961, the General Assembly passed [resolution 1668 \(XVI\)](#), noting the "serious divergence of views" that existed over the representation of China, and resolved that the issue be designated as an "important question" under [Article 18](#) of the UN Charter, meaning that any resolution to settle the question would require a two-thirds majority vote in the UN's General Assembly.

In October 1971, the General Assembly passed [resolution 2758](#) by the required two-thirds majority, which recognised the People's Republic of China as the only lawful representative of China at the United Nations, and expelled the Republic of China's delegation.⁴⁰

At the same session the United States attempted to submit its own resolution proposing dual representation from the People's Republic of China and Republic of China at the UN. However, the resolution above was voted on first

³⁹ "[Taiwan's engagement with the world: Evaluating past hurdles, present complications, and future prospects](#)", Atlantic Council, 20 December 2022.

⁴⁰ "[The Distortion of UN Resolution 2758 and Limits on Taiwan's Access to the United Nations](#)", German Marshall Fund US, Jessica Drun & Bonnie S. Glaser, 24 March 2022.

and accepted. A US motion to amend the resolution, removing the “expulsion of Chiang” part was also rejected.

From 1993, Taiwan submitted annual applications to the UN for membership, under the name of the Republic of China. In 2009 it submitted an application under the name Taiwan instead. All these applications were rejected.⁴¹

World Trade Organization

In 1992 Taiwan was granted observer status at the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) as the Separate Customs Territory of Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen and Matsu (Chinese Taipei). GATT became the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995 and Taiwan became a full member in January 2002 under the same name, a few months after China’s own accession in December 2001.

Taiwan had long qualified for membership but was held back for more than a decade by China's objections.⁴² As well as states, the WTO allows any “customs territory having full autonomy in the conduct of its trade policies” to join the organisation.⁴³ Hong Kong is also a member of the WTO, having its own customs territory.

International Olympic Committee and other international organisations

Taiwan’s participation at the Olympic Games has been a source of tension. From the 1950s to the late 1970s, Taiwan competed under various names, including ‘Formosa-China’ (1956), Taiwan (1960 at the IOC’s insistence, it had wanted to compete as the Republic of China), and as the Republic of China (1972).⁴⁴ The People’s Republic of China refused to participate alongside them and boycotted several games, and it was not represented on the International Olympic Committee (IOC).

Taiwan did not compete in the 1976 Olympic Games after the Canadian Government refused to give its athletes visas unless it agreed to not compete using the Republic of China name, reportedly under pressure from the People’s Republic of China. In 1979 the People’s Republic was admitted to the IOC. In 1981, the IOC helped create a compromise, with Taiwan agreeing to participate in future Olympic Games using the name Chinese Taipei, and with a new anthem, flag and Olympic emblem.⁴⁵

In November 2018, in an advisory referendum, the Taiwanese electorate rejected the option to change the name of its Olympic team from Chinese

⁴¹ [“Taiwan Tries New Name in Application for UN Membership”](#), VOA, 1 November 2009.

⁴² [“Taiwan Joins WTO - 2002-01-01”](#), Voice of America, 1 January 2002.

⁴³ WTO, [‘WTO accessions’](#), accessed 29 January 2021.

⁴⁴ [“Why is Taiwan not called Taiwan at the Olympics?”](#), Hong Kong Free Press, 1 August 2021.

⁴⁵ As above.

Taipei to Taiwan.⁴⁶ The ‘no’ vote saved the Government from a difficult choice: although the referendum was advisory the Government said it would honour the result. However, [the International Olympic Committee warned Taiwan](#) that it could lose its right to compete if it tried to change its name for the 2020 games in Tokyo.⁴⁷

Taiwan, under the name of Chinese Taipei, is a member of the [Asian Development Bank](#) and the [Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation](#) regional forum.

World Health Organization and Covid-19

Taiwan’s status at the World Health Organisation (WHO) attracted attention at the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, in part because of claims by the Taiwanese Government that its early warnings of the spread of the disease were not shared by the WHO to other countries.⁴⁸

Taiwan has observer status at the WHO under the name Chinese Taipei. However, since 2016 China has blocked Taiwan’s attendance at the World Health Assembly, the annual decision-making forum of the WHO.⁴⁹

According to BBC News, the WHO has said that Taiwan's membership or attendance is entirely up to the member states, and the WHO's principal legal officer Steven Solomon has clarified that WHO director-generals “only extend invitations when its clear member states support doing so”.⁵⁰ It appears that China and other countries speaking out against Taiwan’s attendance is sufficient to prevent their presence.

In July 2020 Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office Minister for South Asia, told the House of Lords that the UK was lobbying for Taiwan to be able to attend relevant discussions at international fora such as the WHO.⁵¹

The US, EU, Japan, and several other nations backed Taiwan's bid to attend the World Health Assembly as an observer in May 2020.⁵² The issue was due to be put to a vote at Taiwan’s request, but Taiwan withdrew its request, citing limited time for other countries to discuss containment of the coronavirus pandemic.⁵³

⁴⁶ [“The Latest: Taiwanese reject gay marriage, new Olympic name”](#), AP News, 25 November 2018.

⁴⁷ [“IOC warns Taiwan against name-change that would rile Beijing”](#), France 24, 19 November 2018.

⁴⁸ [“Taiwan says WHO failed to act on coronavirus transmission warning”](#), Financial Times, 20 March 2020.

⁴⁹ [“Coronavirus: Why Taiwan won't have a seat at the virus talks”](#), BBC News, 17 May 2020.

⁵⁰ As above.

⁵¹ [HL Deb 14 July 2020 Vol 804 C1530](#).

⁵² [“Why Taiwan is not recognised on the international stage”](#), Economist, 17 May 2020.

⁵³ [“Taiwan postpones request for WHO observer status vote so members can focus on Covid-19 battle”](#), Hong Kong Free Press, 18 May 2020.

G7 support and recent WHO developments

The G7 group of countries, which includes the UK, released a communiqué after its May 2021 meeting, which included support for “Taiwan’s meaningful participation in World Health Organisation forums and the World Health Assembly”.⁵⁴

A spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry described the G7’s call as “gross interference in China’s sovereignty”.⁵⁵

Taiwan once again failed to gain admittance to the WHA that began on 24 May 2021.⁵⁶ In a statement, Minister of Foreign Affairs Joseph Wu rebuked the WHO for its “continued indifference” to the health of the island’s 23.5 million people and urged the organization to “maintain a professional and neutral stance” and “reject China’s political interference”.⁵⁷

Efforts to include Taiwan in WHO meetings have continued. Most recently in May 2023, the British Office in Taipei, along with its US, Australian, Canadian, Czech, German, Japanese and Lithuanian counterparts, released a statement supporting “Taiwan’s meaningful participation in the work of the World Health Organization and Taiwan’s participation as an observer in the World Health Assembly”.⁵⁸ The WHA rejected Taiwan’s request once again, with China and Pakistan speaking against the bid.⁵⁹

2.3

UK policy on recognition of Taiwan

The UK was the first Western power to recognise the People’s Republic of China, doing so in January 1950, and sending a [chargé d'affaires](#) to Beijing. The UK broke off its recognition of the Republic of China at the same time.⁶⁰

The People’s Republic did not reciprocate diplomatic relations with the UK, demanding the UK support its bid to take up the UN seat occupied by the Republic of China at that time.

The UK and the People’s Republic of China finally exchanged ambassadors in 1972, and the UK closed its consulate in Taiwan that same year. As part of establishing formal diplomatic relations, the UK and the People’s Republic of

⁵⁴ FCDO, Policy Paper: [G7 Foreign and Development Ministers’ Meeting: Communiqué, London, 5 May 2021](#), 5 May 2021.

⁵⁵ PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘[Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin’s Regular Press Conference on May 6, 2021](#)’, accessed 3 August 2023.

⁵⁶ “[Taiwan, excluded from a world health forum, blames Chinese interference](#)”, New York Times, 24 May 2021.

⁵⁷ “[Taiwan, excluded from a world health forum, blames Chinese interference](#)”, New York Times, 24 May 2021

⁵⁸ British Office Taipei, [Support for Taiwan’s meaningful engagement with the WHO](#), 18 May 2023.

⁵⁹ “[Outcry as World Health Assembly locks out Taiwan under pressure from China](#)”, The Guardian, 23 May 2023.

⁶⁰ “Britain recognises Chinese communists”, The Times, 7 January 1950.

China (PRC) signed an agreement that “acknowledged the position of the government of the PRC that Taiwan was a province of China and recognised the PRC Government as the sole legal government of China”.⁶¹

In response to a [2016 petition](#) calling for the UK Government to recognise Taiwan as a country, the Government responded that the dispute between Taiwan and the People’s Republic of China should be resolved “through dialogue, in line with the views of the people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait”.⁶²

The “long-standing” UK policy was confirmed in a Lords debate on 14 July 2020, with Lord Ahmad saying on behalf of the Government:

The United Kingdom’s long-standing policy on Taiwan has not changed. We have no diplomatic relations with Taiwan, but a strong unofficial relationship based on dynamic commercial, educational and cultural ties. We regularly lobby in favour of Taiwan’s participation in international organisations where statehood is not a prerequisite, and we make clear our concerns about any activity that risks destabilising the cross-strait status quo. We have no plans to recognise Taiwan as a state.⁶³

⁶¹ Foreign Affairs Select Committee ‘East Asia’, 2006 (HC 860-I, para 174-5).

⁶² UK Parliament Petitions: [Recognise Taiwan as a country](#), Government responded on 4 February 2016 closed 18 July 2016. Accessed 3 August 2023.

⁶³ [HL Deb 14 July 2020 \[Taiwan\]](#).

3 Taiwan's relations with the United Kingdom

3.1 Diplomatic relations

As explained in section 2.3, the UK, like most other countries, does not recognise Taiwan as a state, nor maintain formal diplomatic relations with the island.

The UK's diplomatic presence on the island is maintained through an outpost called the British Office Taipei. According to the [UK Government website](#), it “promotes trade, investment, innovation, culture, education and other links between the UK and Taiwan”, and “provide[s] practical assistance to British nationals in Taiwan”.⁶⁴

In January 2020, as Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, released a statement congratulating Tsai Ing-wen on her re-election as President. In the statement Mr Raab expressed his hope that “the 2 sides of the Taiwan Strait will renew dialogue to resolve differences and build constructive relations across the Strait”.⁶⁵

The UK has expressed its concern over the years at Taiwan's retention of the death penalty. In 2018 the Foreign Office supported a trip by Keir Starmer, who was then the shadow Brexit Secretary and long-term campaigner on the subject, to lobby for the abolition of capital punishment on the island.⁶⁶

The subject on which the UK and Taiwan most regularly engage is trade and the two sides hold annual rounds of trade talks. For more on trade relations and trade statistics see [section 3.3](#).

⁶⁴ GOV.UK, [Taiwan and the UK](#), accessed 3 August 2023.

⁶⁵ FCDO, [Taiwan elections, January 2020: Foreign Secretary's statement](#), 11 January 2020, accessed 3 August 2023.

⁶⁶ “[Keir Starmer visits Taiwan to lobby against death penalty](#)”, The Guardian, 29 September 2018.

3.2 Defence relations

The UK has no official defence ties with Taiwan. Asked over the years if the UK would consider lending military support to Taiwan, successive governments have repeated that the UK's policy is for a peaceful resolution between China and Taiwan.⁶⁷

Relations between the UK and Taiwan have strengthened over the last few years, and there is now a greater focus on the UK's foreign and defence policy towards the island and the surrounding region.

Part of the reason is the UK's foreign policy aim to "tilt to the Indo-Pacific" set out in the 2021 Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy.⁶⁸ [Relations between the UK and the People's Republic of China](#) have also become more tense.⁶⁹

The 2021 Integrated Review proposed the UK should "continue to pursue a positive trade and investment relationship with China",⁷⁰ but also described China as a "systemic competitor",⁷¹ and that "China's military modernisation and growing international assertiveness within the Indo-Pacific region and beyond will pose an increasing risk to UK interests".⁷²

In the [2023 Refresh of the 2021 Integrated Review](#) the UK Government stated it supports "stability in the Taiwan Strait", and opposes "any unilateral change in the status quo, and in the East and South China Sea", saying "We will support all parties to work together to ensure that heightened tensions do not lead to escalation".⁷³

UK naval operations in the South China Sea

The UK has increased its naval exercises in the South China Sea in recent years. HMS Albion conducted a US-style freedom of navigation operation by the Paracel islands in August 2018,⁷⁴ and in early 2019 the Royal

⁶⁷ See for example, [HL Deb 17 September 2020 \[Taiwan\]](#). And [PQ 139489 \[Taiwan: Military Alliances\], 9 May 2018](#).

⁶⁸ Commons Library research briefing CBP-9217, [Integrated Review 2021: The Defence tilt to the Indo-Pacific](#).

⁶⁹ Commons Library debate pack, [UK relations with China during the presidency of Xi Jinping](#), 14 March 2023.

⁷⁰ Cabinet Office, [Global Britain in a Competitive Age, the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy](#), 16 March 2021, P22.

⁷¹ As above, P26

⁷² As above, P29.

⁷³ Cabinet Office, [Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a more contested and volatile world](#), 13 March 2023, P43.

⁷⁴ "[British navy's HMS Albion warned over South China Sea 'provocation'](#)", BBC News, 6 September 2018.

Navy conducted two joint military exercises with the US Navy in the South China Sea.⁷⁵

At the end of September 2021, the UK sent a warship, HMS Richmond, through the Taiwan strait for the first time since 2008 (HMS Enterprise, a survey vessel, had navigated the strait in 2019).⁷⁶ HMS Richmond, a frigate deployed with the Royal Navy's aircraft carrier strike group, sailed through the strait on a trip from Japan to Vietnam.⁷⁷

The Chinese military followed the vessel and were reported to have warned it away. The People's Liberation Army also condemned the move saying it was behaviour that "harboured evil intentions".⁷⁸

Some commentators have questioned the need for the Royal Navy to conduct such exercises, saying the UK risks becoming involved in a military conflict in the Taiwan Strait.⁷⁹

In December 2023, the Defence Secretary, Grant Shapps, announced while visiting Japan that the Royal Navy would send an aircraft carrier to the 'Far East' in 2025. Mr Shapps said the precise route would be announced nearer the time, but when asked if the UK had a right to sail a warship through the Taiwan Strait, he responded "Freedom of navigation is a globally, internationally recognised freedom, which means it does cover the straits of Taiwan and every other globally internationally recognised stretch of an open sea".⁸⁰

UK Government approach to freedom of navigation in the South China Sea

In September 2020, the Minister for Asia set out the [UK Government's approach to freedom of navigation in the South China Sea](#) in a Commons adjournment debate.⁸¹ A document explaining the [UK Government's position on legal issues arising in the South China Sea](#) was deposited in the Commons Library on the same day.⁸² For more information see the Library briefing [Integrated Review 2021: The Defence tilt to the Indo-Pacific](#).

⁷⁵ "[Royal Navy frigate joins US Navy oiler for South China Sea drills](#)", Naval Today, 20 February 2019.

⁷⁶ "[UK sends warship through Taiwan strait for first time in more than a decade](#)", The Guardian, 28 September 2021.

⁷⁷ Royal Navy, [HMS Richmond sailors reflect on Carrier Strike deployment](#), 23 December 2021.

⁷⁸ "[China accuses British navy of 'evil intentions' as UK warship sails through Taiwan Strait](#)", Sky News, 28 September 2021.

⁷⁹ "[Is Britain heading for war over Taiwan?](#)", The Spectator, Francis Pike, 20 March 2021.

⁸⁰ [British warships can sail the Taiwan straits, Shapps tells China](#), The Times, 14 December 2023.

⁸¹ [HC Deb 3 September 2020 vol 679 cc 342-3](#).

⁸² DEP2020-0516 ([UK government's position on legal issues arising in the South China Sea](#)).

3.3

UK-Taiwan trade statistics and relations

Trade statistics

Below are some headline figures on UK-Taiwan trade.

In the most recent four quarters (Q4 2022 to Q3 2023):

- The UK exported £3.7 billion of goods and services to Taiwan and imported £4.3 billion, resulting in a trade deficit of £0.6 billion.
- The UK recorded a trade surplus in services with Taiwan of £1.4 billion; this was more than outweighed by a trade deficit in goods of £1.4 billion.
- UK trade with Taiwan was more geared towards goods than services – goods accounted for 54% of UK exports to Taiwan and 77% of UK imports from Taiwan.
- Taiwan was the UK's 35th largest export market and 35th largest source of imports, accounting for 0.4% of UK exports and 0.5% of UK imports.
- The value of UK exports to Taiwan were 5% lower in cash terms (i.e., unadjusted for inflation) compared to a year earlier (Q4 2021 to Q3 2022), while the value of UK imports from Taiwan were 4.1% lower.
- The fall in exports was more pronounced in services than goods – the value of UK services exports to Taiwan were 23% lower compared to a year earlier; over the same period, the value of goods exports increased by 19% in cash terms.
- The fall in imports was more pronounced in goods than services – the value of goods imports were 7% lower compared to a year earlier; over the same period, the value of services imports increased by 8%.

UK trade with Taiwan, Q4 2022 - Q3 2023

£ billions

	Exports		Imports		Balance
	£ billions	% total	£ billions	% total	£ billions
Goods	2.0	54.1%	3.4	77.3%	-1.4
Services	1.7	45.9%	1.0	22.7%	0.7
Total	3.7	100.0%	4.4	100.0%	-0.7

Source: ONS, [UK total trade: all countries, seasonally adjusted](#), 26 January 2024

Trade relations

The UK and Taiwanese governments regularly engage on trade, with both governments holding an annual round of trade discussions.

In July 2023, the UK and Taiwan announced they would start “official-level talks on Enhanced Trade Partnership (ETP)”, and that the ETP “will be underpinned by non-legally binding Memoranda of Understanding in key areas such as two-way investment, digital trade, and energy & net-zero”.⁸³

A spokesperson at the Chinese Embassy in London released a statement in response to the ETP announcement and upcoming UK-Taiwan trade talks in which they lodged a strong protest at these interactions:

China strongly opposes official interactions of any form between China’s Taiwan region and countries that have diplomatic relations with China. The UK’s relevant action violated the one-China principle, and its own commitment to maintaining only unofficial relations with Taiwan, sent a seriously wrong signal to the “Taiwan independence” separatist forces, and grossly interfered in China’s internal affairs. We are strongly dissatisfied with and firmly oppose this, and have lodged stern representations with the UK side.

[...] We urge the UK to stop upgrading substantive relations with Taiwan in the name of strengthening trade relationship, and stop any move that violates the one-China principle. Any actions that harm China’s interests will be met with resolute countermeasures.⁸⁴

In November 2023, the 26th annual UK-Taiwan trade talks took place in London. A Department for Business and Trade (DBT) press release stated that the talks “focused on collaboration in critical sectors such as renewable energy and semiconductors, as well as removing barriers to trade to unlock more opportunities for UK firms to export to and invest in Taiwan”.⁸⁵

The DBT press release also confirmed that the two sides had signed an [Enhanced Trade Partnership arrangement](#) which “sets out the UK and Taiwan’s priorities for future ETP discussions under 3 key areas: two-way investment, digital trade, and energy and net-zero”, and that “both sides will begin engaging businesses on the ETP in due course”.⁸⁶

Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership

The Government announced on 31 March 2023 that the UK would be joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).⁸⁷

The CPTPP is a free trade agreement between 11 countries in the Asia-Pacific region (Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore and Vietnam). Joining the CPTPP is

⁸³ Department for Business and Trade, [UK to host 26th annual Taiwan talks to continue to strengthen trade relationship](#), 26 July 2023.

⁸⁴ Embassy of the People’s Republic of China to the UK, [Embassy Spokesperson on an “Enhanced Trade Partnership” Between the UK and Taiwan](#), 26 July 2023.

⁸⁵ Department for Business and Trade, [UK hosts talks with Taiwan to boost trade ties](#), 8 November 2023.

⁸⁶ Department for Business and Trade, [UK hosts talks with Taiwan to boost trade ties](#), 8 November 2023.

⁸⁷ Prime Minister’s Office 10 Downing St, [UK strikes biggest trade deal since Brexit to join major free trade bloc in Indo-Pacific](#), 31 March 2023.

part of the Government's policy, announced in the March 2021 Integrated Review, of pursuing deeper engagement with the Indo-Pacific region.⁸⁸

The UK will be the first new member since the bloc was established in 2018 and the first European member.

Taiwan applied to join the CPTPP in September 2021. However, its application was complicated by the fact that the week before China announced it was applying to join the partnership.⁸⁹

Taiwan had been signalling for some time it wanted to join CPTPP, but China's announcement spurred its own official announcement. Some have speculated that China's announcement was in part a bid to block Taiwan's accession.⁹⁰

In March 2023, Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen called on the UK to support Taiwan's application for CPTPP membership, saying this "would do much to allow Taiwan and Britain to continue deepening their partnership".⁹¹

In September 2023, Liz Truss asked a Parliamentary Question on whether the Foreign Secretary "plans to take diplomatic steps to support Taiwan's application to join CPTPP". The Minister of State, Anne-Marie Trevelyan, responded in short that the UK wouldn't comment on Taiwan's or other countries' applications:

The UK has welcomed Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for TransPacific Partnership (CPTPP) members' willingness to expand the group. Membership is open to all economies willing and able to meet the high standards of the agreement, and with a demonstrated pattern of complying with their trade commitments. The UK's priority now is the key parliamentary processes needed to take place before the deal can be ratified, and we will not be commenting on the specifics of Taiwan or any other economies' interest in the agreement.⁹²

⁸⁸ HM Government, [The Integrated Review 2021](#), 16 March 2021 and HM Government, [Integrated Review Refresh 2023](#), 13 March 2023.

⁸⁹ "[China applies to join Pacific trade pact to boost economic clout](#)", Reuters, 17 September 2021.

⁹⁰ Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, [The CPTPP Bids of China and Taiwan: Issues and Implications](#), 15 November 2022.

⁹¹ "[Taiwan calls on Britain to support its bid for Pacific trade pact](#)", Reuters, 20 March 2023

⁹² [PQ 195952 \[on Taiwan: Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership\]](#), 1 September 2023

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