# Taiwan's Big Brother

21 APRIL 2026

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On a cloudy Saturday morning, I walked towards the conference venue at my alma mater, the University of St. Thomas (Houston, Texas, USA). I received an invitation from my former professor to attend his Taiwanese Geopolitics Conference, which hosted Taiwanese scholars and United States (U.S.) diplomats. I knew little about Taiwan and its political environment, and I believed that attending this event would provide me with fresh perspectives on Taiwan and East Asian politics.

Upon arriving at the venue, I received my nametag and navigated the room to search for a seat and familiar faces. As I settled in, I reminisced about the last time I had visited this building with my friends. I soon reacquainted myself with two of my professors and socialised with other guests

during the morning reception. Within the following hour, the hosts initiated the conference and introduced the scholars to the audience.

For the duration of the conference, the scholars led five panel discussions and identified the key factors that influence the trilateral relationship between Taiwan, China, and the U.S.:

## Taiwan's increasing scepticism but consistent trust in the United States

Local Taiwanese polls indicate increasing uncertainty and some negative views of the U.S. Under the second Trump presidency, the U.S. has actively involved itself as an intermediary or a direct actor in military conflicts around the world, such as the operation in Venezuela and the U.S.'s war against Iran. The Trump 2.0 administration has also enforced its protectionist policy by imposing high tariff rates on all foreign goods. This policy prompted businesses, such as the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC), to make pledges that would move their manufacturing operations to the U.S. and bypass tariffs. These recent U.S. policy decisions generate concern and wariness among the Taiwanese population, especially if Taiwan must heavily rely on U.S. support in a potential conflict with China.

## Chinese "grey zone" warfare towards Taiwan

The Chinese government has pledged to fulfil its policy of "re-unifying" Taiwan but struggles to overcome Taiwan's deterrence strategy. China faces the following logistical challenges in approaching Taiwan: the Trump 2.0 administration's vague and erratic foreign policy decisions, ongoing economic structural issues, and the economic and political disruption of business partners such as Venezuela and Iran. China cannot risk entering an expensive, protracted war with the U.S. under these conditions, and thus it seeks to achieve its policy by non-escalatory means.

Additionally, China struggles to appeal to the Taiwanese youth. China allegedly attempted to influence local Taiwanese politics and society via methods such as disinformation campaigns or support for pro-reunification political parties. While a small percentage of Taiwanese favour reunification or co-existence with China, the younger generations of Taiwanese do not identify themselves as "Chinese" and prefer sovereignty. Furthermore, China risks entrenching Taiwanese support for sovereignty and U.S. partnership by pushing military incursion narratives that worsen Taiwanese perceptions of China.

China cannot take immediate military actions to achieve the reunification of Taiwan and must approach this goal through long-term, soft power influences and gradual encroachment onto Taiwan.

## An adamant U.S. foreign affairs continuity towards the legal status of Taiwan

Under the Trump 2.0 administration, the U.S. continues to maintain its foreign policy stance on Taiwanese sovereignty. A series of legal rulings and vague terminology by the United Nations (UN) and the U.S. categorise Taiwan as a unique anomaly that does not meet the conventional characteristics of a state. Because of these rulings, the U.S. treats the government of Taiwan as a distinct entity from the government in Beijing, without formally recognising Taiwan as an independent state. The UN and U.S. rulings, the U.S. deterrence policy against communist expansion, and the strategic military and economic value of East Asia all reinforce the U.S.'s commitment to maintaining Taiwan's status as a sovereign and distinct entity from mainland China.

After the scholars concluded their panel discussions, we proceeded to the dinner reception. During dinner, I shared stories with a fellow alumna and other Taiwanese guests at my table. Halfway through dinner, the guest of honour, Dr. Richard Bush, approached the podium and delivered his tribute and defence of Taiwan's sovereignty. He reiterated the significance of U.S. foreign policy towards Taiwan and shared his own history and appreciation for the Taiwanese people. His words resonated with the dinner guests, who applauded and thanked him for his support and friendship. Since his tribute highlighted their accomplishments and resilience, his words resonated with the guests, who expressed pride in their sovereignty and culture.

As a Vietnamese American who studied the U.S. and Soviet perspectives of Cold War history, I feel inclined to incorporate multiple perspectives to develop a better understanding of a topic. The conference provided valuable insight into both the U.S. and Taiwanese perspectives on East Asian geopolitics. However, the Chinese perspective – especially on the issue of Taiwanese reunification – was missing. Having the Chinese perspective would allow me to understand why China values Taiwan and the reunification effort. I referenced the Taiwanese opinion poll data and asked a panellist if Taiwan could achieve a unique status as a neutral, intermediary trade partner for both the U.S. and China. The panellist argued that this idea would be impossible to accomplish due to the U.S. and China's fierce contention over Taiwan. With my newfound perspectives of Taiwan's geopolitical environment, I concluded that the Taiwanese issue is likely to persist, as the U.S. seeks to maintain the current status quo while China seeks to reshape it.