

Q &amp; A

## Jessica Drun on Getting the Taiwan Narrative Right

The analyst discusses why the discourse on Taiwan is so often flawed, what the One China policy is and is not, and how Beijing attempts to hijack the narrative.

BY JAMES CHATER — SEPTEMBER 5, 2021

*Jessica Drun is a non-resident fellow at the [Project 2049 Institute](#), where she specializes in political and security issues relating to China and Taiwan, cross-Strait relations and Taiwan's domestic politics. Drun earned her A.B. in International Affairs from the University of Georgia and her M.A. in Asian Studies from Georgetown's School of Foreign Service. She has previously held positions at the National Bureau of Asian Research, the National Defense University, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. In this lightly edited interview, she discussed America's current approach to Taiwan and its historical context.*



Jessica Drun.

Illustration by Kate Copeland

### **Q: How did you come to work on U.S.-Taiwan policy and with Project 2049?**

A: I'm Taiwanese-American, so growing up, my mom would take me to Taiwan every summer. We speak Mandarin at home, and spending summers with grandparents in Taiwan, I was able to pick up colloquial Taiwanese. In college, as I was working through what I wanted to do, I thought, "How can I leverage my strengths?" I've always had an interest in public service and decided to pursue a career in policy to help advance U.S. interests in Asia, and in Taiwan more specifically, given my on-the-ground experiences and language abilities.

### **Much of your work involves debunking or deconstructing terms that get uncritically deployed in discussions about Taiwan. How did you personally come to that more nuanced understanding of U.S.-Taiwan policy?**

Part of it was probably just by the nature of my background as someone of Taiwanese heritage. It was always a little unsettling when meeting PRC nationals to be told when introducing myself, "Oh, but you're not Taiwanese. You know that you're actually Chinese." And to be clear, I don't think this comes from a bad place, it's often what they were taught growing up. But it is erasure and a blatant disregard of my agency to choose how I identify. And I think, in part, that's why I've always been particularly sensitive to the narrative surrounding cross-Strait relations, cross-Strait dialogue and how people talk about Taiwan.

The other part of it comes from, perhaps, having professors in college who don't focus on the region tell me, "I don't understand why you want to work on this issue, because the United States views Taiwan as a part of the PRC." I was slow to the realization that that's not the case. Being in the D.C. policy space, and having Taiwan and cross-Strait experts flesh out the

nuance for me was a pretty big deal; it helped me realize that a lot of the discourse on this is flawed. The understanding is very shallow and diluted, and more needs to be done to broaden the general public's understanding of Taiwan, and what the U.S. position on Taiwan is and is not, because there's so many falsehoods and so much misunderstanding.

**Have you noticed an identifiable shift toward that more nuanced understanding of Taiwan policy within the U.S. now? Or do you still think it is broadly viewed as a substrand of China policy?**

In recent years, there's been a greater push to get the narrative right. I wonder if part of the lack of understanding on Taiwan we see today is an unfortunate side effect of the period of cross-Straits calm from 2008 to 2016. There just wasn't as much focus on Taiwan outside of specialized circles, because it didn't warrant the concern and fear that's perhaps overblown right now in current discourse — and so it wasn't talked about or discussed as much. And then there was the [Trump-Tsai call](#) where the U.S.'s One China policy became front and center. [Former President Trump held a call with Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen during his transition to office in December 2016, breaking with years of precedent.] A lot of people were getting it wrong then, and that event in particular opened up the door for clarification.

The escalation in cross-Straits tensions that started in 2016 also played a part. With the [election of Tsai Ing-wen](#) and the suspension of cross-Straits dialogue — when the PRC cut off official communication mechanisms between the two sides — relations started to deteriorate and Taiwan was, again, a major point of consideration in foreign policy circles. At the same time, there's been more propaganda coming out of the PRC working to shape the narrative in China's favor, such as blaming “pro-independence forces” (their words, as the Tsai administration is pro-status quo) for the deteriorating ties and misrepresenting U.S. policy towards Taiwan. So there's been a broader focus in the U.S. on clarifying policy, making sure that we get our narrative right and ensuring that we're not letting Beijing control the narrative of what our positions are.



Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen in January 2017, shortly before departing for the United States on her way to Central America. During the previous month, her phone call with newly-elected U.S. President Donald Trump incensed Beijing, kicking up a diplomatic row. Credit: Sam Yeh/AFP via [Getty Images](#)

**What specific mistakes were either journalists or policymakers making at that point?**

At the time of the Trump-Tsai call, Trump was saying that even the U.S.'s One China policy was up for debate, asking why he should be bound by it if the PRC was not willing to make concessions? But in actuality, there's plenty of space within the contours of our One China policy to do a lot in regards to Taiwan. And it's been fairly successful for the past 40 or so years.

But a lot of the framing that I was seeing at the time was that the U.S. was going to move from its long-held position that Taiwan was a part of China, to formally recognizing Taiwan. While you know, one facet of potentially overturning our One China policy would be recognizing Taiwan — as some have proposed in Congress. Our [the U.S.] One China policy, as it currently stands, does not take a position on the status of Taiwan. So a lot of the commentary was misconstruing *existing* U.S. policy by saying, “We think that Taiwan is a part of China.”

“ [A] lot of the discourse on [the U.S.' relationship with Taiwan] is flawed, the understanding is very shallow and diluted, and... more

## needs to be done to broaden the general public's understanding of Taiwan, and what the U.S. position on Taiwan is and is not...



That was what raised alarm bells for me. So many people in fairly prominent media channels were saying, “If you look at the language of our communiques, it says the U.S. *recognizes* Taiwan as part of China.” But the key point is, we don’t recognize Taiwan as a part of China, we *acknowledge* the Chinese position, and there’s layers there that need to be dissected. In diplomatic terms, “acknowledged” means simply to take note of the Chinese view that Taiwan is a part of China — not that we agree to it — while “recognized” means acceptance. Further, in the official language of the communiques, it doesn’t say whether the Chinese position is that of the Republic of China or the People’s Republic of China. We don’t even get close to language that touches on sovereignty or says the PRC owns Taiwan.

### What are the tangible implications of this lack of clarity over One China policies?

I would say the One China *principle* — stand alone — is the position the PRC tries to force on other countries and international fora, which more or less says: the PRC is the legitimate government of all of China and that Taiwan is a Chinese province and an inalienable part of its territory. On the other side, you have One China *policies*, and I think it’s very important to stress that there are multiple One China policies, a range of One China policies. This is one thing that in public discourse we can do to help dispel the narrative that One China policies are equivalent to the One China principle.

To your question, we need to focus on the countries that have preserved more space for action in their One China policies and can do more to push back — like the U.K., Canada, U.S., Japan. Within the ambiguity of not taking a position on Taiwan, there’s a lot that these countries can do with Taiwan at the unofficial levels.

With China pushing its narrative, it becomes a discourse control issue, because China can say that the U.S. is reneging on its promises to the One China principle, which again, is not something we subscribe to. That’s why it’s worthwhile for the U.S. and other such countries to clarify what their positions are and are not. We are also seeing attempts by the PRC to normalize its One China principle internationally, falsely claiming that most countries in the world agree to it and that its international law. The U.S. and its partners and allies disagree with this, have pushed back, and should continue doing so.

### What are the potential drawbacks for the U.S. and its allies of being more precise about their Taiwan policy? Why is it that the U.S. doesn’t take a clearer view?

The primary downside is that, because our policy and the policies of our allies are deliberately imprecise, it is easier for general observers to misunderstand our positions and to believe the PRC propaganda push that we agreed to the One China Principle — which, in contrast, is very clearcut.

Fundamentally, the U.S. is unable to take a clearer view outside the confines of our One China policy because we do not take a position on Taiwan’s status. That said, there has been momentum in clarifying what our views *are* and *are not*, such as the example from August 2020 of us declassifying the cables around the Six Assurances and the associated [remarks](#) by Assistant Secretary of State David Stillwell, most notably, “The U.S. has long had a One China policy. This is distinct from Beijing’s “One China Principle” under which the Chinese Communist Party asserts sovereignty over Taiwan. The U.S. takes no position on sovereignty over Taiwan.”

#### BIO AT A GLANCE

BIRTHPLACE	Lilburn, Georgia, United States
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**What about elsewhere in the world? Outside the Taiwan-U.S.-China relationship, are there other places where this narrative is costing Taiwan?**

Generally speaking, the pervasiveness of the PRC narrative on Taiwan *has* cost Taiwan, in the sense that countries self-impose limitations on their engagements with Taiwan. Perhaps this is less so in East Asia, with the proximity — geographically and culturally — there's greater understanding of the nuances. And definitely less so the case as well with countries that have longstanding relationships with Taiwan and ambiguity in their positions, such as Japan, the United Kingdom, and Australia.

But on the whole, the narrative helps play into the broader view among many countries that, “there's this large country China with a powerful economy that we need to collaborate and engage with, why should we risk this for Taiwan.” Taiwan has been viewed more as an inconvenience in advancing a deeper relationship with China, but that narrative has a lot less traction now, especially in Europe.

I'm not sure I can pinpoint a single reason for this shift, but there definitely seems to be a re-examination in numerous countries of how they engage with Taiwan. The [pandemic](#) played a part — at the onset, Taiwan pursued global health promotion efforts and mask diplomacy through whatever channels possible, showcasing that Taiwan is a responsible stakeholder in the international community and that it does want to make substantive contributions in the spaces that it can. I think also a growing awareness of the atrocities being committed in Xinjiang, China's coercive economic policies, and other malign PRC behavior, are giving countries pause.

The other thing is China overplaying its cards in the [expulsion of Western journalists](#). Prominent Western media now have journalists based out of Taiwan instead of Beijing. So naturally they are writing more local stories and about Taiwan outside the context of just China or cross-Strait relations. This presents a more cohesive and comprehensive view of what Taiwan is and of its democracy, instead of it always having to be a subset of China.

That said even with those countries that agreed to the One China principle, there is still space — perhaps less space than the countries that have ambiguous positions — to engage with Taiwan at an unofficial level. We're seeing a lot more of that play out. There have been [debates in Germany](#) on its One China policy and why it doesn't have diplomatic relations with Taiwan. But there's a lot more that can be done even at more local levels. We're also seeing local governments working with Taiwan's local governments to bypass their own federal government and deepen engagement with Taiwan at the local level. So there's shifts at many different levels.

**What are the central mechanisms and channels that Beijing is using to propagate its narrative about Taiwan internationally?**

State media and Ministry of Foreign Affairs statements are the big ones. A good recent example is that we are seeing this a lot with how Covid vaccine efforts are playing out. For example, they'll say something along the lines of: “How dare Japan provide Covid vaccines to Taiwan when Japan subscribed to the One China principle?” But it doesn't and never has. Or: “How can the U.S. work one-on-one with Taiwan when the U.S. agreed to our views that Taiwan is a part of China?” This is also untrue.

But at the same time, there's also pressure campaigns at multiple levels. One thing that is particularly worth stressing, especially now, is how we've seen Chinese pressure on Taiwan's attempts to acquire vaccines as a subset or microcosm of China's broader influence campaign toward Taiwan. The One China principle is pushed not just at the PRC-to-country level, but at the business level too.

MISCELLANEA	
BOOK REC	<i>A Tale of Two Cities, but to better understand the U.S. "One China" policy, I recommend <a href="#">The Legislative Intent of the Taiwan Relations Act: A Dilemma Wrapped in an Enigma</a> by Lester L. Wolff</i>
FAVORITE MUSIC	Taylor Swift
FAVORITE FILM	<i>Your Name (君の名は)</i>
PERSONAL HERO	Whoever invented and graced the world with bubble tea

We saw that play out with [BioNTech](#), the German company that's working with the Chinese company Fosun. One of the deals to ship vaccines to Taiwan reportedly fell through because Taiwan was labeled as a country. There are other examples of how the PRC has pressured companies internationally to adopt its stance on Taiwan: [Marriott hotels](#) in 2018, and then the whole fiasco with airline

companies in 2018 as well. Beijing pressures companies by saying, "If you don't agree to the One China principle, then you can't be in our market".

### What are the domestic challenges facing Taiwan in uniformly counteracting this narrative propagated by China?

At least in regards to the notion of One China, there is not a consensus in Taiwan among the two main political parties (the current ruling Democratic Progressive Party and the opposition Kuomintang). It's also worth stressing that, in general, for actors to advance dialogue with China, or even in broader discourse on U.S.-Taiwan-China triangular relations, you have to avoid certain terms because of disagreements in definitions or to avoid certain sensitivities. So then you're left with broad and vaguely defined conceptualizations. In the case of the KMT and the CCP, they have tacit agreements around broad baselines that really start to unravel when you reach a certain degree of specificity. Just look at the 1992 Consensus.

The 1992 Consensus served as the foundation for cross-Strait rapprochement between Taiwan and China under the previous administration of Ma Ying-jeou. It was a tacit agreement between the KMT and the CCP that there is "One China," but without explicitly defining what that "China" is (the PRC or the ROC). Its origins are disputed, as it reportedly came out of a 1992 meeting in Hong Kong, but the term itself was not coined until 2000.

However, to me, the 1992 Consensus is largely grounded in political will on both the parts of the KMT and CCP, an unspoken "agree to disagree" with both sides willing to come to the table under this broad conceptualization of a One China, even though they don't agree on what that China is.

To me, that has been the fundamental flaw with the KMT's China policy. If you get into the details, all they say to the CCP is the 1992 Consensus and One China; but when they turn to domestic audiences in Taiwan, they say, "but our China is the Republic of China, One China, respective interpretations 一中各表". That was never on the table for the CCP. That the 1992 Consensus was able to endure during the Ma administration as the baseline for cross-Strait dialogue stems largely from the PRC's willingness to tacitly accept that view. But because nothing was ever truly agreed upon, there's no written formal document. The KMT put all their eggs in the CCP's basket, for lack of a better phrase. And we have started to see signals out of the PRC that they may be pressing the KMT to clarify its view, with former government officials saying that to Beijing, the "true" one China is the PRC.

“ [Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen] did everything she could to continue advancing cross-Strait dialogue, it was the CCP that cut the official communication mechanisms... There's nothing coming out of this current administration that has shown it's pro-independence. ”

### How does the DPP, Tsai Ing-wen's party, figure in all of this?

At risk of oversimplification, the DPP, like the KMT, views Taiwan as sovereign as the Republic of China. However, the 1992 Consensus is a non-starter for the Tsai administration. In her 2016 inauguration speech, she said she respected “the historic fact” and acknowledged the progress achieved since 1992, which more or less signaled a willingness to build off the momentum of the previous administration, but without explicitly saying the words “1992 Consensus” and “One China.” That was insufficient for the CCP. But it's also worth stressing that Tsai did everything she could to continue advancing cross-Strait dialogue. It was the CCP that cut the official communication mechanisms. The onus on deteriorating cross-Strait tensions is on the CCP. There's nothing coming out of this current administration that has shown it's pro-independence.

### Toward the end of the Trump administration, there was some concern that the harder stance on China might evaporate, negatively impacting Taiwan. How has the Biden administration fared?

To me, the Biden administration has done a pretty good job in terms of U.S.-Taiwan relations. First and foremost, we're seeing continuous, bipartisan support for and engagement with Taiwan, in line with longstanding U.S. policy. What we're seeing differently than with the previous administration is that the Biden administration places greater emphasis on shared values and shared interests, a greater emphasis on working with like-minded countries, and incorporating Taiwan in those discussions; there's more coordination with other democracies.

There's also a greater focus on substance over symbolism. My concern with what the Trump administration was doing was that a lot of the meetings and high-level visits seemed to have more symbolic value than actual substantive value. And then you run into the question where you ask, “Is deepening engagement helping Taiwan's position in the world or putting a target on it?” As we often see in Taiwan's engagement with the U.S., Taiwan bears the brunt of China's anger on this, not Washington. So I think we need to be careful that the engagement that we have helps Taiwan's standing, helps it better stand against the PRC, and can help it combat Chinese influence and pressure. Perhaps most significantly is whether trade talks will advance between the U.S. and Taiwan; that would have the most substantive gains in helping Taiwan diversify its economy and lessen its reliance on China.



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BY EYCK FREYMAN

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