



***The Beijing Brief* podcast
The Brookings Institution**

“How secure is Taiwan? The view from Taipei”

Tuesday, August 18, 2026

Participants:

Jonathan A. Czin
Michael H. Armacost Chair in Foreign Policy Studies
Fellow, Foreign Policy, John L. Thornton China Center
The Brookings Institution

Ryan Hass
Director, John L. Thornton China Center
Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy, Center for Asia Policy Studies, John L. Thornton
China Center; Chen-Fu and Cecilia Yen Koo Chair in Taiwan Studies
The Brookings Institution

Caitlin Talmadge
Raphael Dorman-Helen Starbuck Associate Professor of Political Science
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Nonresident Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy, Strobe Talbott Center for Security,
Strategy, and Technology
The Brookings Institution

Episode Summary:

Ryan Hass and Jon Czin are joined by Brookings Nonresident Senior Fellow Caitlin Talmadge for a special episode of *The Beijing Brief* from on the ground in Taipei. Drawing on conversations with Taiwanese counterparts, they unpack how Taiwan is thinking about its own defense, why its technology industry is central to its national security, and where Washington's read of the situation falls short.

[music]

CZIN: Hello, you're listening to *The Beijing Brief* from the John L. Thornton China Center at Brookings, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm Jon Czin, fellow and Michael H. Armacost Chair in the China Center.

HASS: And I'm Ryan Hass from the China Center. This is a special episode of *The Beijing Brief* recorded on the ground in Taipei at the end of a one-week study tour across the island.

[0:21]

In Washington, conversations about Taiwan tend to run on two parallel tracks. On one, Taiwan is a potential military flashpoint. On the other, Taiwan is the beating heart of global semiconductor industry, and the question is what happens to the world economy if that industry is disrupted. But those questions are very much intertwined.

Taiwan's security depends upon its technology innovation, and that innovation depends upon its security. The nexus between security and technology is what our delegation came to Taiwan to examine on the ground.

CZIN: So over the past several days, our delegation has met with Taiwan's senior political and national security leaders, representatives of both major political parties, defense and cyber experts, public opinion researchers, and leaders from Taiwan's semiconductor and technology industry.

Today we want to step back and assess what we learned from these conversations. And after everything we saw and heard, what did this trip reveal about Taiwan's security situation and its relationship to its technology industry? What does the view from the ground tell us about Taiwan's security that we miss in Washington?

HASS: We're joined by one of the smartest in the field, Caitlin Talmadge, to help us debrief this trip. Caitlin is the Raphael Dorman and Helen Starbuck Associate Professor of Political Science at MIT and a nonresident senior fellow at Brookings. Her research focuses primarily on nuclear deterrence and escalation, civil-military relations, U.S. military operations and strategy, and security issues in Asia.

Caitlin, thank you for being with us.

TALMADGE: It's great to be with you.

[1:42]

HASS: So to get us started, I know, Jon, you sort of provided a brief outline of the trip, but what, what have we been doing for the past week? Why are we in Taiwan and, uh, and, and what were some of the things that most stood out to you?

[1:53]

CZIN: I mean, I think the the most important thing about being here is to get an on-the-ground perspective about what's really going on. Right? Like, there's so much

chatter in Washington about the cross-strait dynamic and about Taiwan, but I think it's really important to talk to a wide variety of people. Right?

And I think what's been so interesting about this trip is that we're able to hear some of the same storylines, but from very different angles. Like, you get a different spin on it if you talk to the DPP versus the KMT, but also I think you get a different feel for what's going on here if you talk to the technology companies versus government officials versus think tankers. Right?

So it allows us to really triangulate and get a wide variety of perspectives that, you know, even following these issues from Washington, it's just, it's different from 10,000 miles away, believe it or not.

[2:34]

HASS: So help us understand that difference. What do you see, Caitlin, about sort of the delta between the discourses taking place in the United States related to Taiwan security issues and and what we heard from counterparts on the ground in Taiwan?

[2:45]

TALMADGE: Well, we've had a really exciting and engaging series of discussions while we've been here, and I think we've learned a lot about the question you're asking, which is, you know, how, how do things kind of look different when when the rubber meets the road, you come from D.C. and actually get on the ground?

And I I would point to a couple of things that have stood out. Of course, I'm interested in in your perspectives on this too, but I think one has to do with, I would say, not the nature of the threats that Taiwan faces, but perhaps the urgency of some of the threats that they face across the Taiwan Strait.

I would say there's been quite a fixation in D.C. and in U.S. foreign policy circles on 2027, that a Chinese attack might be imminent, a Chinese invasion might be imminent. None of us can predict the future, obviously, but I I'd had the sense while I've been here this week that, while Taiwanese are by no means relaxed, I think, about the the security environment, there's less of a fixation on 2027 as "this is the year."

And and, you know, we may want to talk about there may be other years that they're, that they're more concerned about. But, both in terms of polling research that we've had a chance to look into in some depth while we've been here, and also just anecdotally, the conversations that we've had, there's a sense Taiwan may actually be in a window in which, for for reasons we can discuss, China is less likely to directly militarily confront Taiwan.

That's not to say that it might not do other things that are unpleasant, including gray zone threats, which actually have been escalating, but it it's a different assessment of of the near-term problem, I think, than what we see in D.C. or what we we typically hear.

[4:15]

The other delta that I would just kind of point to, and it it relates to the first point, is I do think there has been skepticism in D.C. and criticism in D.C., frankly, of Taiwan and its approach to defense policy, and the sense that given the threat as perceived in D.C. as being so urgent and so imminent, this imminent risk of military attack in 2027, that Taiwan is not doing enough, or Taiwan doesn't get it, so to speak, on needing to make defense reforms.

And I think after being here for a week and talking with leaders from industry, leaders from think tanks, leaders from the government, you know, political leaders, thought leaders, I think that is a misnomer. I mean, I think, I think there is a lot of fresh thinking in Taiwanese defense strategy. I think there's a recognition that Taiwan does need to respond to the threat and needs to respond asymmetrically, which is a change, and that requires certain defense reforms.

So I think there's actually a very sophisticated understanding of the changes that are needed among subject matter experts. Now, getting from here to there is, is another question, and we've also looked at that, and I'm sure we'll talk about that. But I, I think the idea that Taiwan doesn't get it somehow about its own security situation, I think that is misplaced.

[5:29]

CZIN: I think that's right, and I agree with that, and I've been very struck being on the ground here. You know, there there's always a tendency to think that it takes a long time to turn the ship of state, and I feel like the ship of state here is turned. Right? Like, they seem to be oriented in the right direction. Is it enough? The answer's probably not yet, but they're also dealing with a near-peer military to the United States. Right? Like, the challenge before them is daunting, but I feel like there it is a sense of focus on it.

And, you know, this is one of the things I've been pondering, and I don't think it's just because, you know, we're national security types from Washington. The the debates over the special defense budget and about Taiwan's defense posture really seem to be preoccupying political figures. Like, everybody we talk to seem to be immersed in the detail in a way that I think would not be the case in the United States if we were not engaged in direct conflict.

Like, there was so much talk about the special defense bill and then about what was included in it, and more importantly, what was omitted from it. So I think that was really striking to me. Right? Then there does seem to be, you know, anecdotally from talking to people on the ground, there does seem to be a generational shift that is either underway or is actually in fact already occurred, right, where there is a seriousness about, about the threat that they're facing.

And, you know, I hesitate to put it this way because I don't want to have clientitis after just a week here. You could make the case, I think reasonably, you know, the Trump administration has been very focused on allies and partners picking up more of the slack for for their own defense. Right? And Taiwan does seem serious about it.

[6:56]

And I think what's underappreciated in Washington that does not get enough play, like, there has been so much talk over the last decade about decoupling from China, and Taiwan has decoupled in some ways. Like, 10 years ago, we kept hearing, you know, 80% of Taiwan's foreign investment was going to the mainland, and now it's less than 1%. Right?

I mean, I think the real conundrum that maybe I didn't really appreciate and others in Washington may not appreciate it is the challenges that create. Right? Because if they are gonna be serious about these new defense technologies like drones and you're not able to procure equipment from China, which is totally sensible for Taiwan, right, it's gonna be expensive.

And those are some of the, the challenges that, that, that they're thinking through, but that is a sign that they are quite serious about thinking this through.

[7:38]

HASS: Yeah. You know, it's worth noting now less than 1% of foreign direct investment goes into China, and yet at the same time, Taiwan's economy is growing over 13% the past quarter. And so it's remarkable what the Taiwan economy is doing, and we can talk about why in a moment.

But but first I wanted to dwell upon something that Caitlin referred to, which is the window of time that may be available for Taiwan to implement some of these defense reforms. Can you guys elaborate a little bit further what window you're referring to, and do you think that it is in fact the case? Do you, do you agree with that diagnosis?

[8:13]

CZIN: So, so my theory about this for the last year or so has been, you know, as you said, 2027 was the preoccupation for a long time, the so-called Davidson Window. Right?

But I think what's really clear is that, for Beijing at least, 2028 is gonna be the next pivot point. Right? I think Xi is very focused and very serious on getting China's military modernization right. They've made incredible strides in the hardware that they're making, and it's daunting and formidable. But he seems very discontent with the quote unquote "software side" of it, the organizational piece.

Which is why I think, you know, that he's, and we've talked about this on earlier episodes, he's had such a thoroughgoing purge of his military high command. Right? But I think it's because he feels, number one, confident in his ability to to manage the Trump administration. Right?

And I think he does feel tentatively optimistic maybe about the cross-strait dynamic and that there could be a change in leadership here in 2028. I think that gave Xi the breathing room to to do a total renovation of his high command. Like, I keep joking, like, you don't do a renovation if you think you're about to have a major national security crisis, and like, if you're a homeowner, you don't do a renovation, like, if

you're feeling the pinch. You do it when you feel a little comfortable and you feel a little plush. Right?

And Xi has clearly gone into the demolition phase with his high command. And I think as long as that's the case, I mean, we did this study with CSIS at the start of the year. It's like 53% of the high command, as much as 53% of the high command could have been dismissed from office. Mao era level of purges in the military. Right?

So I think there is really a window here. And I think 2028 is gonna be the next turn of wheel. And that what's really going to, to be decisive is what happens, of course, in Washington and who's the next president in Washington, but also I think more importantly for Xi in some ways in terms of the cross-strait dynamic, who's the new leadership here in Taipei?

[9:57]

TALMADGE: I don't disagree with anything, but that was just that. In fact, I've learned a lot from you on this trip about, about these issues, and we'll be spouting these opinions as my own very soon. But, know, you, you've given us an explanation for that window maybe being longer from the perspective of Chinese domestic politics and and organizational politics.

And I would just say from the the lens that I kind of look at these things at which, it, you know, has more to do with, civil military dynamics, and just, just thinking about sort of military basics, it it takes time to build an effective officer corps and, you know, officers with strategic level thinking that can coordinate and plan, you know, very complex operations.

And so even putting aside the the political incentives and all, and all of that, which I think you're, you're absolutely, you know, bringing really important insights there that I, I strongly agree with, you know, 2028 sounds kind of optimistic if you've just gotten rid of, you know, more than half of your high command to have replacements in place who can do the things that you thought your previous commanders couldn't do.

And so, you know, from a military technical perspective, I would almost say that that pushes things out even further if the reason for doing these purges really is related to the ability to conduct these very potentially complex operations across the Taiwan Strait.

That's that's a very tall order to just completely turn that around. And and you pointed this out in some of our meetings, these purges have happened. The replacements have not happened. So it's, it's, it's out with the old, but not in with the new yet.

[11:23]

CZIN: And I I would just clarify the point. Right? Like, I don't think 2028 means that there's gonna be a million-man swim in 2028 by PLA. Right? 2028 is going to be when Xi may rethink his cross-strait policy more broadly. Right? because he's going to be... he's going to know at that point, "Am I dealing with the KMT? Am I dealing

with a with a fourth term potentially of the DPP?" Which I think he would find extremely frustrating.

But, I don't think he has an expectation that this military modernization project will be totally completed. I mean, he has to now reconstitute the entire Central Military Commission, you know, the the top echelon of the party's high command. Right? And even once people get into place, in any system, it takes a while to learn that job, and it takes longer to learn a job when you're terrified the boss is gonna put you in jail.

TALMADGE: Absolutely.

[12:08]

HASS: In the context of deltas between the conversations taking place in Washington and Taipei, one of the things that I think our visit has exposed is a bit of a different allocation of focus between the the spectrum of risks that Taiwan faces between ongoing day-to-day gray zone activities, which is the risk of quarantine or blockade, all the way up to full-scale invasion.

And the perception, at least on the ground at Taipei, appears to be that Washington is more seized with the high-end spectrum risk of full-scale invasion, whereas Taipei is living day-to-day with some of these lower-end, you know, gray zone and other forms of pressure.

Can you help us think through how how this is occurring, why it is occurring, and whether or not it's a a problem, what to do about it?

[12:49]

TALMADGE: Sure. Well, I think fundamentally why it's occurring is because the nature of the Chinese threat has expanded and kind of blossomed, so there, there is a lot to worry about, and of course, it gives rise to debates about what to prioritize. I think you're absolutely right: D.C. is very concerned with the high-end invasion threat, I think partly for self-interested reasons because that's probably the scenario that, that most directly threatens Washington's interests for a variety of reasons.

I myself have been a bit critical of, for example, Pentagon's very strong focus on that scenario. Not that we shouldn't think about invasion, we absolutely should. But I think there's also a bunch of reasons it, it may not be the most likely scenario.

Now, at times, I've actually gotten pushback from Taiwanese friends who basically say we have to worry about invasion because invasion is actually the only scenario in which, like, we don't get a vote because it's just it's just a brute force takeover, whereas the other scenarios are a matter of our will, right, to resist coercion. And so, we have more control in those other scenarios. It's what we're willing to suffer, whereas the invasion scenario, they can literally just take our home from us.

So I, I get some of that, but I I think you're right that in our conversations this week, we've, we've heard some different perspectives that in many ways, Washington is still fixated on the high end, whereas in the day-to-day, they are living actively with escalated levels of coercion in the strait.

And we heard in almost every meeting a discussion of the fact that China's just doing a lot of things today that they weren't doing even a year ago. And we heard with quite a lot of specificity about, you know, that the air incursions have decreased a bit, but there's much greater threat in the naval domain from Coast Guard, including on on Taiwan's eastern coast, which is, you know, something that's new.

And so this is something that they're actively living with and that they want to push back on, I think, ASAP. And I think, you know, notwithstanding the comments I made about how a coercion scenario gives them a, you know, a bit more control over their fate in some ways, that also means that they have to be ready to resist a coercion scenario that, you know, perhaps is the more likely thing China would do, and and that potentially involves a a lot of suffering and harm to Taiwan's people.

And so of course they're, they're very concerned about that.

[14:55]

CZIN: I think it kind of captures a broader conundrum facing the administration's defense policy in this part of the world. Right? Namely that they're claiming they're focused on, you know, the high-end contingencies, right, and, like, an actual war fighting scenario, so they're not going to focus on all this churn in the meantime.

And it's not just about Taiwan, right, like, I hear the same things in Washington about South China Sea, East China Sea. Right? We're not going to focus on those things because it's not the high-end fight. We're going to focus on, on the high-end part of it.

But what's challenging about that is that when you're dealing with the politics of managing relationships with allies and partners, if you're not there when they're dealing with the PLA Navy operating on their eastern coast or the Chinese Coast Guard, it makes it untenable over time to to sustain that kind of approach, right, where you're just focused on on high-end capability. Right? Because your allies are going to start to wonder, like, "Is it worth making the investments? Is the United States going to be there?" And I think that makes it very challenging.

I mean, to put a slightly different spin on it, like one of the things that have been striking to me on this trip is, and that I don't think I fully appreciated from, again, from Washington, is that if you go through the relationship between Taiwan and the United States right now, what's really interesting is how close the economic relationship has become.

Part of that is driven by secular factors that are, you know, it's part of the administration policy, but also secular from it. That's the AI boom. Right? Like those, the, the economic relationship is gangbusters because our AI companies are buying so many chips.

But it's not just that, it's a matter of policy too. Like they have their ART now. Right? Like they're one of the first countries to get a trade deal in the region, so the economic relationship is quite tight.

The defense relationship, you know, I wasn't sure what it would look like being on the ground. It seems to be okay But then what's really interesting and where I think this is a missed opportunity is the political relationship. There's a lot of anxiety here about about the commitment from the United States to Taiwan, and I think it encapsulates this conundrum we were just talking about, right, like, can you prepare for the high-end fight if your partner doesn't really feel reassured?

And I think what was really striking about some of our colleagues that we interacted with on the trip, they're like, "Look, we get politics is politics, rhetoric is rhetoric. We don't take it that seriously." But holding up a \$14 billion arms sale, because Xi Jinping doesn't like it, you know, doesn't make them feel good about where things stand.

And I think that's kind of the elephant in the room in this conversation. Right? Like, why are we not doing that, and why is there hesitation from the United States? It's not just because we're only focused on the high-end fight. It's because, you know, the administration's China policy has not played out the way that they hoped that that would. Right?

Beijing has effectively put a lid on some of our competitive actions on the technology front, but I think also our engagement with Taiwan, and that's the reality, and that's definitely been on people's minds here, is what's going to happen in the run-up to the next summit between Xi Jinping and Donald Trump. Right? I think you can't discuss these things without talking about that element and the dynamic.

[17:43]

HASS: Caitlin, what did you take away from the conversation about how folks in Taipei are perceiving the Trump administration and its level of support and commitment to Taiwan?

[17:55]

TALMADGE: Well, I don't disagree with anything that was just said. The coda that I would add is I think it's added to the sense in Taiwan that we have to help ourselves.

And I I think that notion was already there to some extent. If you actually look at polling, a lot of Taiwanese have not believed for a while that the U.S. actually was going to come defend them in these sorts of high-end scenarios. And I, if I'm not mistaken, I think that predates the current administration.

But we heard that, I think, pretty explicitly from quite a few quarters that Taiwan has to be responsible for its own defense. And in fact, in polling and also in conversations that that we had here across a number of venues, there's a lot of evidence that Taiwanese want to fight for their society, and they, you know, they, they support the status quo. They're not, they're not actively looking for, for independence or reunification but, you know, if, if they're threatened, they they want to fight and to defend that status quo.

And so I think that's, that's sort of the flip side of everything we've been talking about. Yes, there's serious concerns about U.S. reliability. We haven't even talked

about some of the things they're taking away from the Iran part, which I think have a lot of implications for U.S. will and capability to come to the aid of, of other friends and allies.

But it, it adds, I think, to this sense that we've got to take care of ourselves, so we've got to get our own defense strategy house in order, and that is part of the impetus to the reforms that we talked about a bit, and we'll probably talk about some more.

[19:15]

HASS: So let's, let's dwell on the geopolitics for a moment because there are two active wars ongoing in in Ukraine and Iran right now. Caitlin, you explored this question with many of our counterparts—what geopolitical factors are most on the minds of of Taiwan's gears. What, what do you take away from those conversations?

[19:33]

TALMADGE: Well, I think we heard a lot about the Ukraine war and about how it might offer lessons to Taiwan about defending against a revisionist nuclear-armed power, say, that was bent on invasion, and how a technologically savvy state with a strong will to fight could fight that great power to a stalemate and make it very costly.

And I I think that that was reassuring that there there's actually been a lot of study of that question, and it's feeding into these conversations about developing an asymmetric defense strategy, which, as we said at the top, I think is, is kind of the, the ideational shift that has happened. Now, that's got to be followed up with implementation, but I think that- that's part of the thinking.

We've talked some this week, maybe not as much as I would have liked, but I think it's an emerging topic about the implications of the Iran war and what what Taiwan might learn from that as well. I think there's there's lessons there for Taiwan.

The bad news is kind of what we've already been talking about and alluding to, which is that it's another siphon for U.S. strategic and and political attention and military resources. Many people are familiar with the depletion of munitions, both offensive and defensive in the Iran war that are exactly the sorts of munitions that will be relevant to the high-end scenarios that we've just been talking about in the strait. And so I think, I think that's, that's negative.

I think the war also demonstrates the vulnerability of U.S. fixed basing in the region, which is something Brookings colleague Mara Karlin and I have written about. And, as we've said, if you, if you like the Iran war, you'll love the Western Pacific on this issue because, you know, the U.S. is still heavily reliant on fixed basing and and of course, China has even more capable missiles in terms of just going after fixed targets.

So I think, I think there's some bad political, military, strategic news there for Taiwan about the U.S. and, and its experience in the war.

[21:21]

But on the flip side, and it's, it's a little bit impolitic sometimes to say, "What can we learn from Iran?" Because this isn't, this isn't a nice regime that we necessarily consider to be a role model in a number of respects. But I think this war has actually demonstrated on the Iranian side the viability of an asymmetric defense strategy for resisting coercion and deterring invasion by a nuclear-armed great power, which incidentally is exactly Taiwan's security problem.

And Iran's a country that's full of engineers and got a strong scientific base, like another country we know, and they've spent a lot of time developing indigenous defense capabilities, missiles, drones, mines. And without having their navy or air force intact, they've held off the United States.

And I think, you know, frankly, if Donald Trump had known in, you know, January everything he knows now about the nature of Iranian resistance he would face, I don't think he would've launched this war.

And the good news for Taiwan is I think Xi Jinping's actually more rational and analytical than Donald Trump. And so if Taiwan can signal the development of those sorts of capabilities and the potential for cost imposition, I think that goes a long way towards strengthening deterrence and, and fostering peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.

Now, of course there's differences. There's differences between Ukraine and Iran and Taiwan, and I'm not trying to gloss over those, but nevertheless, it's really notable in both of those wars that I think there are some hopeful lessons for Taiwan, and I think they're paying attention.

[22:51]

CZIN: Yeah, I mean, just as a casual observer of some of these dynamics, it is really striking to me just how much modern military technology seems to favor defense rather than offense. Right? And, like, for Taiwan, that is that is a hopeful storyline. Right?

I think the other thing that jumps out to me more broadly on the back end of this trip is, and this is an idea I've been playing around with for a little while, but you know, Xi Jinping has been so preoccupied with the Taiwan issue, right, and that's very much the vibe in Washington. I think that's a reality. Right? Xi Jinping's spent most of his career on the Taiwan Strait and, and seems to keep his own counsel on it. But I really wonder and worry almost, there seems to be a real bankruptcy, intellectual bankruptcy at the heart of this Taiwan policy.

We saw some polling this week about the Ma Ying-jeou era, the the previous president who was friendlier toward Taiwan, and that was when there was an uptick in sentiment on Taiwan that China was not friendly toward them. Right? So to know China was not to love them remarkably. Right?

So that approach didn't work, that softer approach didn't work., And the punitive approach that, and more coercive approach that Xi Jinping has shifted toward over the last eight years or so since President Tsai came into office back in 2016, does not seem to have demoralized the island and had the intended effect. Right? They

do seem to be serious, invigorated about defense reform and taking these challenges seriously in a way that maybe they weren't a decade ago in the Ma era,

So he's tried the hard approach. That doesn't seem to be on a positive trajectory for Xi Jinping. He had tried the soft approach, or his predecessor really had tried the soft approach. That ended in a cul-de-sac and the the election of Tsai Ing-wen. So if neither of those approaches work, where does, where did that leave you as Xi Jinping, right? And you want to get to some kind of political discussion about the cross-strait dynamic and the relationship with Taiwan.

[24:37]

HASS: Well, I think it leaves a bit of a paradox because on one hand there is, you know, the strategy that Beijing is pursuing towards Taiwan is not yielding fruit. At the same time, Beijing is investing massively in its military capabilities and its coercive capabilities. And we talked a moment ago about the window of time that may exist while Beijing reconstitutes its military high command and organizes itself for the ability to exercise you know, military capabilities around Taiwan.

What would you both be looking for as evidence that Taiwan is using this time effectively to put itself in a stronger position to deter, or if necessary, deal with increasing military pressure from Beijing?

[25:14]

TALMADGE: Well, I think this is a really important question because one of the themes of our conversation is that Taiwan is doing more now, but so is China.

And so the the benchmark isn't is Taiwan doing more than it did last year, it's is Taiwan doing enough to counter what China's doing that's different from last year? And that, that's a tall order because of of what you just laid out. And so as we've I think there, there has been this ideational shift, and there has been, I think, particularly in, in the last two years, a focus on defense reforms.

We're we're here during the the Han Kuang exercises. We had a meeting interrupted with a notification on our on our phone. Everyone got it at the same time. We thought it was a typhoon, but it wasn't. And there's been an emphasis, for example, on making those more realistic.

But, you know, at the same time, over the course of the last year, there has been this debate over the special defense budget, and we could talk for five hours about that, and we have.

But, you know, the the gist of it is that political division within Taiwan has prevented long-term investment in domestic drone production, even though numerous people that we talked to emphasized how important this technology was, even though there's evidence from Ukraine and Iran of how important this technology is, and even though we, we know Taiwan can build stuff.

I mean, we know they can design high technology and produce what they have. But yet, for a variety of reasons, that hasn't happened. And so I I think one of the things to be watching is in the upcoming year, you know, there, there's been these steps.

Right? It it was at least proposed. It was at least debated. And a big chunk of it was funded, but not this this domestic drone production long-term piece. And so as that comes back up in the LY, you know, what, what happens to that? To to put it cruelly, do we see people putting their money where their mouth is?

[26:49]

On, on the drones issue, I think also with these exercises, they've been becoming more realistic, but I'd be very interested to know in a week or two what's what's the readout on these, what do they look like next year?

And the other thing we, we heard a lot about this week that we haven't explicitly touched on is the whole-of-society resilience efforts. And this really gets to preparation for coercion scenarios, blockade scenarios, and it, it's a different set of requirements from just fending off an invasion. They're, they're related, but, but I think, again, Taiwan has done a lot in that area, but I think there's still a lot left to do in terms of stockpiling, in terms of, you know, resilience, hardening, dispersal. We, we could talk quite a bit about it.

But those are, those are the nitty-gritty things that I really will be watching coming back from this trip. And I think, you know, conversations on this trip have really sensitized me to those details, which I think has been really informative.

[27:41]

CZIN: Yeah. I I I think that's right. I think you, you hit on the right things. So realism of their training, their ability to procure and manufacture some of the technologies that that they actually need. Like you hear talk about UAVs and swarming. Right? But we all know that that's harder to actually do.

But this is what we keep talking about, right, Caitlin, it's not just about procuring the hardware, but having a concept of operations and the doctrine, and I think they appreciate that. And to actually use this, right, and figure out the mechanics of how you make this all work with an actual war plan. Right? And that, in some ways, is the hardest piece of it, and, and, and we're still stuck on just the, the hardware part of it.

I think what, what, what strikes me at the back end of this trip is how central the politics is to all this. Right? Like this seems to be, like, drone procurement for some kind of contingency seems to be like the political issue here right now, which I think on the one hand shows how serious that they're taking this issue, right, that this is so central to their politics right now. But it's also trouble, because it's really hung up right now.

And I think this is, it's a big glimmer of hope for Xi Jinping, right? Like, if I'm trying to look at it from his perspective, like that is what, you know, to the extent that there's a problem or even bankruptcy with his Taiwan policy, what he's hoping for is for, you know, KMT to win and get some kind of political discussion underway in 2028. Right? He thinks he has an opportunity maybe to reopen those kind of conversations that he wanted to push towards back during the Ma Ying-jeou administration.

And what's interesting is from talking, and I'd be curious to hear your thoughts about this, Ryan, from talking to people here, there don't seem to be major points of divergence between the KMT and the DPP on domestic policy issues. Like, they're experiencing k-shaped economic growth because of a tech boom, et cetera, things that people would be familiar with in the United States.

But where there are real differences are not over the kitchen table issues that most voters vote on. It's actually over these questions about defense and also about the relationship with Beijing. That seems to be the most divisive issue here.

[29:32]

HASS: You both have put a number of topics on the table. I want to ask you one final question. What spaces will you be watching as things evolve in the coming months and years to try to handicap Taiwan's political trajectory and its overall security situation?

[29:49]

CZIN: I mean, I think the one that, that, that stands out is the blindingly obvious one after after a week here is, is this question about the supplemental package for drones. Right? Like, it seems to be hung up for now, right, but they're gonna have their own midterm elections. I mean, it's kind of remarkable they're almost on the same political calendar as us. Right?

But, if that gets passed after they have their own midterms, right, if there's something akin to our lame duck session, you know, that would be an important indicator. Right? The politics is not so toxic that they're able actually to get some of the things done that they actually need to for their own defense. So as I I think about the next six months or so, I think that is going to be the first item that I'm looking for.

And then from Washington's perspective, the real question is, you know, what happens with the arms package on our side? So does the \$14 billion arms package that was ostensibly on the president's desk earlier this year, does it get broken up into smaller pieces? Are they able to manage it in a way that even if they break it up into smaller pieces, they can, they can sell things to Taiwan without stimulating some kind of allergic reaction for Beijing?

[30:46]

TALMADGE: I would agree with both of those. I I would just foot stomp the point about the drone production and the special defense budget and sort of the fate of the the new version of that. I think it's not only important substantively in terms of Taiwan's capabilities for all the reasons that we've been talking about, but I think it relates back to your first question, Ryan, about why there's daylight between D.C. and Taipei on some of these issues. And I think, I think the special defense budget has acquired sort of an outsized political importance to D.C. in terms of assessing Taiwan's seriousness about its own defense.

And so I'll be watching that issue, not just because I think passing it is the right thing to do, and I think, I think it really would leverage a lot of Taiwan's asymmetric

advantages, but because I think it it sends a signal back to D.C. that Taiwan is serious about its own defense.

And again, we we heard that this week. But, you know, for those here, I, I think it is important to understand the the sort of political resonance that that issue has acquired in D.C.

[31:43]

HASS: Well, Caitlin, Jon, thank you so much for sharing your insights and your perspectives from on the ground in Taipei with with all of us. I'm struck listening to you, you know, trajectory of Taiwan appears to be very strong. There is very narrow divisions on domestic political issues in Taiwan. The, the real fault lines appear to be around issues of identity, and issues of funding for security.

One of the other things that I was struck by over the course of this week was how insular the politics are in Taiwan. There are wars raging around the world. The United States is in a period of flux politically, and I think that many of our counterparts would acknowledge that, but that wasn't front of mind for them. What is front of mind is, you know, what they're wrestling with in front of their face.

And it's just a reminder of, the complicated, complex, maddening, and fascinating Taiwan that we live with every day. And thank you for bringing that to our audience.

[music]

CZIN: On behalf of the team at the John L. Thornton China Center, thank you for listening to the Beijing Brief. This podcast is produced by the Brookings Podcast Network. For more in-depth analysis from our team, please visit the China Center on the Brookings website at [Brookings dot edu slash China Center](https://www.brookings.edu/china-center/). You can also subscribe to our monthly newsletter, the China Bulletin, for the latest updates.

Our thanks to the production team, including supervising producer Ike Blake, senior producer Fred Dews, producer Allie Matthias, and video producers Daniel Morales and Teddy Wansink.

Rachel Slattery designed the show's artwork. We would also like to thank Alex Dimsdale, Joyce Yang, and Amanda Lee, as well as our colleagues in the John L. Thornton China Center, Foreign Policy, and the Office of Communications at Brookings for their support.

And to learn more about this podcast, go to [Brookings dot edu slash TheBeijingBrief](https://www.brookings.edu/the-beijing-brief/) or wherever you like to get your podcasts.