

“Skepticism about the U.S.” Spreading in Taiwan



Arriving at Taipei Songshan Airport on August 2, 2022, Nancy Pelosi posted on social media, “Our visit reiterates that America stands with Taiwan: a robust, vibrant democracy and our important partner in the Indo-Pacific.”

Photo: Office of U.S. House Speaker, public domain

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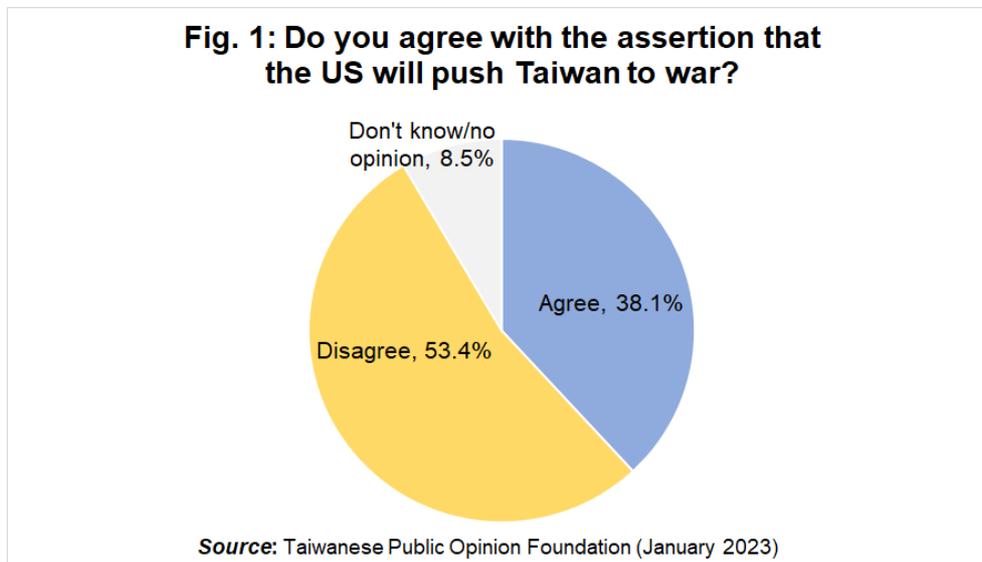
Taiwan’s next presidential election in 2024 will not only set Taiwan’s direction, but also have a major impact on the future of the U.S.-China conflict and the stability of East Asia. It is also a matter of great concern to Japan. In Taiwan, “skepticism,” which questions the intentions and actions of the United States, is gradually spreading. The content of “skepticism about the U.S.” differs depending on the commentator, but the common feature is that “relying on the United States will lead to a disastrous end for Taiwan.” Some say, “If we rely on the U.S., the U.S. will not act, and Taiwan will be abandoned by the U.S. in the end,” while others say, “If we do as the U.S. says, Taiwan will be used as a pawn to suppress China. In the end, there will be a war in Taiwan and that will be the end.”

This “skepticism” shares common logic with China’s criticism of the United States. In Taiwan, Kuomintang (KMT, Chinese Nationalist Party)-affiliated politicians, critics, and scholars advocate “skepticism.” The “skepticism” itself is not a new argument. As has been said before, the mainstream public opinion in Taiwanese society is “pro-American,” so “skepticism” did not spread. However, since the end of 2022, the idea of “skepticism” has been increasingly featured in the Taiwanese media.

Degree of “skepticism about the U.S.” penetration

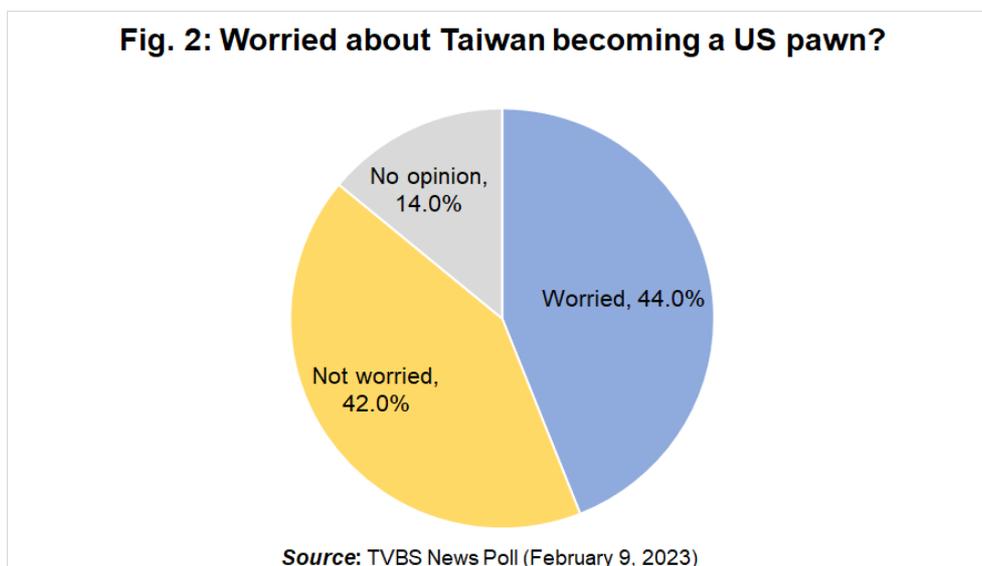
To assess the level of acceptance of “skepticism about the U.S.” in Taiwan, we can refer to an opinion poll conducted by the Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation (TPOF) in January 2023. The poll asked the question, “Some people say that U.S. support for Taiwan, such as military aid, could push Taiwan towards war. Do you agree with this view?”

The responses were: “very much agree” 18.4%, “somewhat agree” 19.7%, “not much agree” 33.1%, “disagree completely” 20.3%, and “don’t know/no opinion” 8.5%. When sorted, 38.1% of respondents agreed with the statement, while 53.4% disagreed (Figure 1).



It is true that “disagree” is in the majority, but “agree” at 38% is quite high. This indicates that “skepticism” is widespread.

In the same opinion poll, “In December 2022, the U.S. Congress passed its annual National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) which included provisions that would allocate US\$10 billion in military aids to Taiwan over five years’ time. Whether Taiwanese public welcome the aids to Taiwan?,” 59.1% said “welcome” and 28.4% said “not welcome.” U.S. military aids to Taiwan are “welcome,” but the truth is that there is a glimpse of the “deep psychology” of worrying about the United States.



Let’s take a look at the results of an opinion poll released by TVBS News on February 9th. This poll also directly relates to “skepticism.” The question asked was, “Do you worry about Taiwan becoming a pawn used by the United States to wrestle with China?” The responses were: “worry” 44%, “not worry” 42%, and “no opinion” 14%. The concern about “Taiwan becoming a pawn of the United States” is evenly divided. However, “worry,” or “skepticism,” slightly outweighs “not worry” (Figure 2).

In this opinion poll by TVBS News, respondents were asked, “If House Speaker Kevin McCarthy were to visit Taiwan, would you welcome him?” The responses were: “welcome” 56%, “not welcome” 23%, and “no opinion” 20%. Although the Taiwanese people would welcome House Speaker McCarthy’s visit, their deep psychology remains complex. There may be a change in the atmosphere compared to the former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan in August 2022.

From these TPOF and TVBS News opinion polls, it can be confirmed that “skepticism” is gradually spreading. Next, we would like to discuss the factors behind this.

Factors behind the spread of “skepticism”

“Skepticism about the U.S.” should be viewed as a phenomenon that is intertwined with several factors.

- (1) The level of vigilance towards a Chinese military invasion of Taiwan, which was not a major concern before, has increased.
- (2) The United States’ arms sales and support for Taiwan have become more generous than before, which has led to doubts about whether the United States intends to send only weapons to Taiwan and have them fight, without sending troops.
- (3) The prolonged Ukraine conflict has made the horrors of war appear more realistic.

Factors (1), (2), and (3) are interrelated. Taiwan’s military and government are always alert and prepared for China’s armed aggression. However, the majority of Taiwanese people believe that “China cannot invade Taiwan militarily.” This balance has kept Taiwanese society calm. Despite Taiwan’s calmness, Japan, the United States, and Europe have continued to make remarks that inflame Taiwan’s crisis, and this has subtly affected public opinion in Taiwan.

The cornerstone of Taiwan’s security is the military power of the United States. Taiwan should welcome and take comfort in the fact that the United States has become more proactive in ensuring Taiwan’s security than before. However, the situation in Ukraine has begun to affect this situation. It is understandable to experts that the United States is providing Ukraine with a large amount of weapons but not sending troops. However, the general public does not necessarily consider international politics. Following the conflict in Ukraine, there is an increasing suspicion among Taiwanese people that if a crisis were to occur in Taiwan, the United States would only send weapons and not troops.

Ukraine is struggling against Russia, a military superpower. The impact of this situation on Taiwan appears to be evolving over time. Initially, the resistance of the Ukrainian people was admired and many Taiwanese gained courage, thinking “we can do it too.” From the end of 2022, international media reported repeatedly that “It will soon be one year since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.” This news was repeatedly re-reported in Taiwan. The images showed the reality of many people being injured and losing their lives in the darkness and cold of power outages. Although international media reports condemn Russia’s atrocities, a natural reaction among the Taiwanese public who have seen them is the spreading of the sentiment, “It would be terrible if there were in fact a war in Taiwan.” This anxiety fits perfectly into China’s information warfare campaign, which says, “there is no use fighting against China.”

The narratives that China disseminates are “the United States is trying to restrain Russia by having Ukrainians fight without shedding its own blood” and “Taiwan, even if it relies on the United States, will eventually be abandoned. Is that okay?” The United States’ “ambiguous strategy” of not explicitly stating military intervention in the event of a crisis in Taiwan can also be used against it.

Furthermore, in 2022, the sale of mine-laying vehicles was included in the weapons announced by the United States for Taiwan. This also led to surprise and reinforced “skepticism” as to whether or not they would install mines in their own city if the Chinese army landed, although there is military rationality in doing so to impede their advance.

In addition, the dissemination of various opinions and views by American experts and specialists also has a negative impact. The United States engages in active discussions in public forums to shape its own strategies. When various opinions on Taiwan policy, such as those that belittle Taiwan or extreme pessimism, are presented, they lead to fluctuations in Taiwan’s emotions and can be used in China’s information warfare.

Moreover, in the local elections of 2022, the ruling party brought up the slogan “to resist China and protect Taiwan,” but the explanation was incomplete and damaged the trust of the Taiwanese people. The decline in trust in domestic affairs in Taiwan also affects trust in policies towards the US and China. The Ma Ying-jeou administration was also like this.

Impact on the Presidential Election

The issues that will determine the outcome of the Taiwanese presidential election can be narrowed down to two: (1) the future of Taiwan, and (2) relations with China and the United States. In the Presidential election of 2024, the weight of (2) is expected to be even greater than before.

There is no doubt that “skepticism about the U.S.” will also become an important issue. It may even become the deciding factor in the election. To simplify, if “skepticism” spreads further, it will benefit the KMT, while if the spread of “skepticism” is contained, it will benefit the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).

The election campaign is about to begin. William Lai of the DPP will appeal that the Tsai Ing-wen administration has made Taiwan’s relationship with the US very close, and interest in Taiwan in the international community has increased as never before, in an effort to dispel “skepticism.”

The KMT has not yet determined its candidate, but their basic diplomatic strategy will likely involve correcting the Tsai administration’s one-sided approach to the US (the extent of which will differ depending on the candidate) and finding a way forward through dialogue with China.

In previous presidential elections, it has been a pattern that if China increases pressure on Taiwan, it will have the “reverse effect.” However, if “skepticism” spreads, the narrative may shift to “blaming the United States.” This may result in an election where the previous pattern no longer applies.

The United States is naturally cautious about the spread of “skepticism” in Taiwan. They would likely prefer the continuation of the DPP administration rather than the KMT, who may use “skepticism” to their advantage. However, it will be difficult to counteract “skepticism” without a careful explanation from the United States. For example, if House Speaker McCarthy visits Taiwan, China may respond with large-scale military exercises.

If the Taiwanese people perceive his visit as a performance for domestic audiences in the United States, it will have a negative impact. On the other hand, if the US Congress can explain that it is evidence of bipartisan support for Taiwan, it will be positive. The critical factor will be whether the United States can formulate a “one voice” policy towards Taiwan.

China is likely to increase its information operations to spread “skepticism” and sway public opinion in Taiwan. Recently, China’s activities have been noted to include not only direct criticism of the United

States in its propaganda but also indirect methods of subtly sowing seeds of distrust toward the United States through discussions about everyday life and hobbies on Taiwanese social media platforms. On the other hand, there is always the possibility that China's own actions will diminish the effectiveness of "skepticism about US" and turn it into "skepticism about China." There is no way for KMT to control this.

Ultimately, the outcome of the discussion on "skepticism" will be decided by Taiwanese voters in the election, but the attitudes of the United States and China will also have an impact. It is likely to be a challenging election campaign.

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