

How Taiwan Democratised, Why the PRC Won't, and Why It Matters to Aotearoa New Zealand

Francesca Zhang

It is important for policymakers and the public of Aotearoa New Zealand to understand the political systems of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) and Taiwan, as the Republic of China (ROC), and how they have developed. While both the ROC and PRC share a common history, we have seen a dramatic political divergence between them since 1949.

Taiwan democratised over thirty years ago; yet in contrast, the PRC's authoritarianism continues to deepen. In Taiwan, democratisation was driven by international pressure and a fledgling democratic system after 38 years of martial law. A vibrant civil society was eventually met by incremental and effective democratic reforms. While the ROC evolved to become a robust democracy on the island of Taiwan, the same process is unlikely to occur in the PRC, which is now ruled indefinitely by Xi Jinping, after Chinese legislators removed the term limits of his presidential role in 2018.

Contrary to the hopes of many in the West and internally, the PRC is not on a path towards democracy, but becoming more authoritarian. In contrast, Taiwan has transformed from a repressive regime to a thriving democracy remarkably quickly.

These developments have a direct impact on New Zealand's foreign policy: we must face up to the risks posed by the PRC's decline into authoritarianism, and strengthen our ties with Taiwan.

Why Taiwan Matters to Aotearoa New Zealand

There are two major aspects of Aotearoa New Zealand's foreign policy that are affected by the existence or lack of democracy in other countries: our values-based foreign policy, and our emphasis on the multilateral rules-based international order. Aotearoa New Zealand places a strong emphasis on politically liberal values in its foreign policy, including the values of democracy and human rights.¹ As a small state, Aotearoa New Zealand relies on the multilateral rules-based international order – the system of international law, agreements and institutions that govern how states interact with each other – to protect

¹ Nanaia Mahuta, "Inaugural Foreign Policy Speech to Diplomatic Corps," February 4, 2021, <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/inaugural-foreign-policy-speech-diplomatic-corps>.

its interests.² The system aims to prevent “might is right” international relations, whereby the most powerful countries always get their way, which is of particular concern to less powerful countries like Aotearoa New Zealand.

Democratic countries are characterised by respect for the rule of law, institutions, and checks on power, and it is reasonable to expect that they will apply this internationally as well as domestically. Even if power-hungry leaders are elected, their power is limited by systems of checks and balances. In contrast, authoritarian systems have very few checks and balances, which allows aggressive leaders to cause major damage to international peace and security.

From the 1980s and until very recently, Aotearoa New Zealand, like its Five Eyes partners and many other Western democracies, engaged in a series of activities and projects aimed at nurturing grassroots democracy in the PRC.³ These activities included training the judiciary and funding NGOs, scholarships, and cultural fellowships.⁴ Since Xi came to power in 2012, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has crushed any shoots of democratisation in China.⁵ Consequently, Aotearoa New Zealand, and many other countries, has had to make significant adjustments to the way it engages with the people and government of China.⁶

Under Xi, China has ignored the territorial rights of the Philippines in the South China Sea, which are recognised by international law.⁷ China has broken its internal obligations in regard to the Basic Law in Hong Kong and is imposing its authoritarian policies on the formerly thriving democracy.⁸ An international tribunal recently classified the Chinese government’s brutal actions against the Uyghur people as genocide.⁹ In the South Pacific, as elsewhere in the developing world, the PRC is increasing its political influence.¹⁰ In Antarctica, China is expanding its presence with an agenda of making future claims on territory, to explore for valuable minerals, which are currently banned from exploitation,

² Mahuta, “Inaugural Foreign Policy Speech.”

³ Thomas Lun, “U.S. Assistance Programs in China,” *Congressional Research Service* 7-5700 (2014), <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/RS22663.pdf>.

⁴ Lun, “U.S. Assistance.”

⁵ “China: Xi Doubles Down on Repression,” Human Rights Watch, published January 17, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/01/17/china-xi-doubles-down-repression>.

⁶ Anne-Marie Brady, “New Zealand’s Quiet China Shift,” *The Diplomat*, July 01, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/new-zealands-quiet-china-shift/>.

⁷ Tom Phillips, Oliver Holmes, and Owen Bowcott, “Beijing rejects tribunal's ruling in South China Sea case,” *The Guardian*, July 12, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/12/philippines-wins-south-china-sea-case-against-china>.

⁸ Grace Tsoi and Lam Cho Wai, “Hong Kong security law: What is it and is it worrying?” *BBC*, 30 June, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-52765838>.

⁹ Joel Gunter, “China committed genocide against Uyghurs, independent tribunal rules,” *BBC*, December 9, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-59595952>.

¹⁰ Jonathan Pryke, “The risks of China’s ambitions in the South Pacific,” *Brookings Institute* 20 (2020), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-risks-of-chinas-ambitions-in-the-south-pacific/>.

and to set up ground stations for its own version of GPS, Beidou.¹¹ Under Xi, China has stepped up political interference as a tool of foreign policy. China's political interference against Aotearoa New Zealand was so effective that the CCP praised it as a model of relations with other countries.¹²

China's effective control over the South China Sea risks disrupting New Zealand's main sea lines of communication.¹³ Beijing's actions in Hong Kong and Xinjiang go against our values, breach international law, and threaten the interests of the tens of thousands of New Zealand citizens and residents living in Hong Kong and Mainland China. New Zealand has a 15% territorial claim in Antarctica - we value the protection of its natural environment, and we do not want China to expand its military assets there. And of course, we do not want the CCP government infiltrating our political system and eroding our own democracy.

Aotearoa New Zealand needs to better understand the political realities of the PRC to protect our national interests and national security. At the same time we are at risk of neglecting an opportunity to further relations with Taiwan because we don't fully understand it, and because we fear the CCP government's response. Therefore, appreciating how and why Taiwan has evolved as a democracy, and contrasting that with China's slide in the opposite direction informs our assessment of the risks and opportunities for our relations with both Taipei and Beijing.

Taiwan: From Harsh Authoritarianism to Blossoming Democracy

Taiwan's bumpy path to democracy can be traced back to the origins of the Republic of China (ROC): founded as a constitutional democracy in 1912, these governing principles were poisoned by warlordism, civil war and foreign invasion over the years 1916-1949. The 1946 constitution of the ROC's ruling Nationalist party, the Kuomintang (KMT) should have allowed substantial civil rights to citizens. However, with the resumption of the civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists from 1947-1949, these rights were overruled. The KMT imposed a state of emergency that would begin their extraordinary level of control after 1948. Upon losing the war with the communists and fleeing to Taiwan in 1949, the KMT continued to subject Taiwan to authoritarian martial law backed by its "rubber stamp" legislature, institutions and election systems over the next forty years¹⁴ -

¹¹ Anne-Marie Brady, "China's Expanding Antarctic Interests: Implications for New Zealand," *SSANSE* 2 (2017), <https://www.canterbury.ac.nz/media/documents/research/China's-expanding-Antarctic-interests.pdf>.

¹² Anne-Marie Brady, "Magic Weapons: China's political influence activities under Xi Jinping," *Wilson Center*, published September 18, 2017, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/magic-weapons-chinas-political-influence-activities-under-xi-jinping>.

¹³ Ministry of Defence, *Strategic Defence Policy Statement* (Wellington: Ministry of Defence, 2018), 24.

¹⁴ Chen Chien-Kai, "The State-Society Interaction in the Process of Taiwan's Democratization from 1990 to 1992," *East Asia (Piscataway, N.J.)* 28, no. 2 (2011), 122.

all justified in terms of repressing the Communist threat, but actually to ensure KMT rule by suppressing any dissenters.

Under this harsh political environment, early seeds of democracy began to emerge in the 1970s. Various social movements across Taiwan (such as anti-pollution, feminist, and indigenous movements) found popularity, awakening the civic consciousness of Taiwanese society.¹⁵ These groups, together with the *dangwai* - a loosely-knit opposition movement made up of (officially) independent candidates contesting in local elections, but prohibited from forming their own official opposition parties – were challengers to the dominant KMT regime. Eventually, the *dangwai* was able to utilise the momentum from these social movements to popularise pro-democratic aspirations in Taiwan.¹⁶

Around the same time, international pressure was another trigger for democratisation in Taiwan. The KMT was heavily reliant on the United States for economic and diplomatic support to modernise and maintain defences against the mainland. Towards the late 1970s, it became increasingly harder for the US to legitimately support an undemocratic Taiwan against a rising PRC that was looking to open up under Premier Deng Xiaoping.¹⁷ Washington finally severed its official ties with Taipei and established diplomatic relations with Beijing on 1 January 1979.¹⁸

Fighting for survival in the international community as more and more countries switched recognition to the mainland, the KMT needed a fresh approach to win friends. With communism no longer the threat it once was, democratisation became a positive tool. As such, the KMT was wary of taking a hard-line approach towards the growing number of democratic voices in Taiwan.

The emergence of Taiwanese nationalism also bolstered democratisation - a drive for self-determination and justice, especially after decades of colonisation by the Japanese prior to 1945.¹⁹ By appealing to this sentiment, the *dangwai* were able to garner widespread support from the Taiwanese population.²⁰ By the late 1980s, nearly all segments of society had participated in large-scale protests. This development, and the international situation, created a fertile space for the rise of the Democratic People's Party (DPP).²¹

¹⁵Chao & Huang, "Civility and Civil Society," 179

¹⁶ Chao & Huang, "Civility and Civil Society," 165.

¹⁷ Schafferer, "Taiwan's Defensive Democratization," 45-61.

¹⁸ At the same time, the US Congress (which maintained a staunchly anti-communist stance) enacted the Taiwan Relations Act to continue informal and ambiguous engagement with Taipei.

¹⁹ Schafferer, "Taiwan's Defensive Democratization," 43; Jacobs, "Myth and Reality in Taiwan's Democratisation," 168.

²⁰ Jacobs, "Myth and Reality in Taiwan's Democratisation," 168.

²¹ Chao & Huang, "Civility and Civil Society," 172-173.

Since the opposition movement was substantial, organised, and had broad support, the KMT was unable to challenge the DPP without triggering major civil unrest.²² Reformists within the KMT and oppositionists in society were then able to gradually unpick the authoritarian pillars.²³ In 1991 the “rubber stamp” institutions were dismantled and democracy could really begin to flourish in Taiwan. And with growing support for the DPP against a KMT-dominated regime, Taiwan’s democratic fervour took hold because its society was ready to participate. Taiwan held its first fully-democratic presidential elections in 1996 and is now a thriving democracy.

‘Democracy’ in the PRC: A False Hope?

The official term for the PRC political system is the “people’s democratic dictatorship”.²⁴ This draws on the Leninist concept of the CCP as the vanguard of the proletariat, who represent “the masses”. The Chinese term for democracy means “people rule” (*minzhu*). It bears no resemblance to representation via free and fair elections, which is the basis of democracy in the ROC political system. Although the CCP briefly permitted grassroots elections in the 1980s, these were ended when it became apparent that voters wanted more than rubber-stamp representatives. The CCP’s false claim to democracy cannot form the basis for true democratisation in China.

The PRC is nowhere near as vulnerable to international pressure as Taiwan, especially in the present day under Xi Jinping. Xi’s China has restored the CCP’s total control over media, education, culture, religion, and civil society. There are no political alternatives to the CCP. It controls a strong and largely self-sufficient military. And the PRC has broad diplomatic recognition and international legitimacy, unlike Taiwan.

So even though international actors (both state and non-state) may strongly desire democratisation in the PRC, they have little leverage with which to make this happen on a top-down, or, under Xi, a bottom-up basis. Moreover, the CCP weaponises Chinese nationalism to increase support for itself – to be patriotic is to support the Party.²⁵ In Hong Kong, the democracy movement was strongly tied to a sense of Hong Kong identity as separate from the PRC, but that movement has now been crushed. Therefore, it is unlikely that the PRC political system could democratise in the same way Taiwan did.

²² Chao & Huang, “Civility and Civil Society,” 172.

²³ Chen, “The State-Society Interaction.”

²⁴ Mao Zedong, *Selected works of Mao Tse-Tung* (4th ed) (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1965), 418.

²⁵ Mao, *Selected works*, 175.

Conclusion

There are important implications of these developments for Aotearoa New Zealand's national interests and national security. We should understand that a CCP-led China is here to stay, and we should act accordingly – putting aside any naïveté about attempting to politically liberalise the PRC, or even appease it.

We should also do more to recognise Taiwan as an important partner, both politically and economically. Taiwan has a strong economy, with a population of 23 million, and has an advanced and long-standing insight to dealing with the CCP. Aotearoa New Zealand's national interests and national security are gravely at risk in the Xi era; we need all the friends we can get to help protect them.

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