



CONFLICTSTAIWAN

## Taiwan-China: What's behind ex-leader Ma Ying-jeou's visit?

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**Former Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou is breaking new ground by visiting mainland China. Experts say his Kuomintang party would like to be seen as playing a peacemaking role, as Taiwan prepares for elections.**

The visit to [China](#) is not official, but it is historic — this week, former Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou became [the first current or former leader from the self-ruled island to travel to mainland China](#) since the Chinese Civil War ended in 1949. Ma has also brought a delegation of students and academics with him to conduct what he has described as a mission to "improve the cross-strait atmosphere" through the enthusiasm and interaction of young people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait.

His 12-day trip is being closely followed in Taiwan, China, and around the world. Taiwan's

Mainland Affairs Council, which is in charge of cross-strait relations, said Ma should consider expectations from Taiwan's civil society as he embarked on the trip. Some lawmakers from the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) cautioned him not to fall into Beijing's "cognitive traps."

Why is Ma's visit to China stirring controversy at home?

[China views Taiwan as part of its territory](#) and believes the two should one day be unified either through peaceful means or military force if necessary.

China's Taiwan Affairs Office has welcomed Ma and expressed willingness to provide assistance during his 12-day tour in China. When the former president landed in Shanghai on Monday, he was greeted by senior officials from the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) Taiwan Work Office and the party's Shanghai Municipal Committee. A meeting with President Xi Jinping is not on the cards.

### Beijing ties key for Ma's party

Just ahead of the visit, [Taipei lost another diplomatic ally, Honduras](#), to China, reducing the number of countries that recognize Taiwan as an independent nation to 13. On Wednesday, Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen [started a trip to Central America and the US](#), during which she is expected to meet US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy in California and deliver a public speech.

The contrast in Ma and Tsai's destinations reflects the two main factors dominating Taiwan's foreign policy agenda. Since taking over from Ma in 2016, Tsai Ing-wen has strengthened bilateral relations with the US. At the same time, [tensions between Taipei and Beijing](#) have escalated.

Ma's party, the opposition Kuomintang (KMT), has been pushing to restart cross-strait exchanges after a three-year interruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Last month, the KMT's deputy chairperson, Andrew Hsia, took a delegation to China and met with several high-level CCP officials in charge of Beijing's Taiwan strategy.

### How is Beijing responding to Ma's visit?

"I think the idea that China remains the most important relation for the KMT is still very true," said Sana Hashmi, a postdoctoral fellow at the Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation in Taiwan. "Ma is trying to form a narrative that the KMT is for peace and restoring cross-strait ties while the ruling party DPP could lead Taiwan to conflicts."

### Walking a thin line in China

Ma's trip to China also carries a lot of political implications in Taiwan itself. Some analysts say the ex-president may be trying to "re-establish his political legacy" with his party carefully balancing political goals.

"The KMT wants to show they have meaningful relations with China but that message can't be so strong that it seems they are conceding to China," said Lev Nachman, a political scientist at the National Chengchi University (NCCU) in Taiwan. "They are really trying to strike a balance here."

Other analysts have pointed out that Ma has focused the trip on facilitating exchanges between young people from Taiwan and China. This apparently shows that he hopes to help restore civil interaction and reduce hostility across the Taiwan Strait.

"Before he left for China, Ma's office emphasized that he wouldn't go to Beijing and he wouldn't meet with Chinese leader Xi Jinping," said Da-Jung Li, a professor of international relations and strategic studies at Tamkang University in Taiwan. "I think he has carefully chosen the places he'll visit in order to avoid excessive political interpretation."

### Ma sends a message of peace

During his presidency from 2008 to 2016, Ma prioritized closer ties between Beijing and Taipei. However, his efforts prompted large-scale protests when he attempted to push through a controversial cross-strait trade pact in 2014. His decision to [meet Chinese leader Xi Jinping in Singapore in 2015](#), the first-ever top-level meeting between China and Taiwan, [added to the backlash against him and the KMT](#).

On Tuesday, Ma emphasized that people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait are all ethnically Chinese and they share the same ancestors. He also helped complete a banner with



Ma (center) helped complete a banner with a message of peace Image: Ma Ying-jeou Foundation

a message urging the pursuit of peace and "Revitalizing China."

While the KMT tries to take initiatives to restart cross-strait exchanges, some analysts say the terms and conditions to fulfill bilateral dialogue are dictated by China. Chen Fang-Yu, a political scientist at Soochow University in Taiwan, points out that even though Taiwanese authorities continue to view dialogue with Beijing as beneficial to cross-strait relations, Beijing has been the one to cut off communication or exchanges with Taipei over the last few years.

"Whether Ma can change Beijing's decision-making pattern through this visit is hard to say," Chen told DW. "Beijing only wants to interact with Taiwanese individuals or organizations if they pledge to oppose Taiwan independence and support unification. These are conditions that Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party won't agree to."

#### Elections loom large amid tensions with Beijing

With the next presidential election in Taiwan only 10 months away, Ma's visit to China could become a campaign issue. Over the years, the KMT

has advocated for a friendlier relationship with the CCP while the DPP has been a staunch defender of Taiwan's sovereignty. Closer ties with Beijing could be a tough sell in this election cycle, as the level of skepticism and negative views toward China has risen among Taiwanese voters as [China's stance has become increasingly aggressive](#).

On the other hand, the KMT's efforts to present itself as a peacemaking party might attract some undecided voters, as they often are less interested in issues like human rights, democracy, or authoritarianism, says Chen from Soochow University.

"If the KMT frames the upcoming presidential election as a choice between 'war' and 'peace,' their peacemaker campaign could be appealing to some undecided voters," he told DW. "No one in Taiwan wants war and following the military reform introduced by the Taiwanese government last December, many parents worry whether their children will have to serve in the military."

If these factors are combined together, it could be a quite effective strategy to influence undecided voter

*Edited by: Darko Janjevic*