

# China-Taiwan Weekly Update, November 22, 2023

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**Data Cutoff: November 21 at Noon ET**

*The China–Taiwan Weekly Update focuses on the Chinese Communist Party’s paths to controlling Taiwan and relevant cross–Taiwan Strait developments.*

## Key Takeaways

1. The TPP-KMT deal to form a joint presidential ticket broke down after the parties failed to reach a consensus on who would head the ticket. TPP candidate Ko Wen-je is signaling he is prepared to run as a solo candidate but left open the possibility of reaching a new deal by November 24.
2. The PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs denied the validity of alternative regional security frameworks in response to the Philippines’ calls to establish an ASEAN-led South China Sea code of conduct.
3. CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping called for convening a “more authoritative international peace conference” to promote a “just and lasting solution to the Palestinian issue” during a speech at a special BRICS leaders video summit on November 21.



## Taiwan

**The TPP-KMT deal to form a joint presidential ticket broke down after the parties failed to reach a consensus on who would head the ticket.** Ko Wen-je and KMT presidential candidate Hou Yu-Ih agreed on November 15 to form a joint presidential ticket to challenge DPP candidate Lai Ching-te. They agreed to use public opinion polls conducted from November 7-17 to determine which of them would lead the presidential ticket and to announce the results on November 18. The parties agreed to a point system in which a candidate would receive one “point” for each poll in which a ticket led by that candidate had more support against Lai than a ticket led by the other candidate. The deal included a concession by Ko that he would accept as a “loss” any poll result in which the difference between him and Hou fell within the margin of error.<sup>[1]</sup> Disagreements over the definition of this “margin of error” led to disagreement on the outcome on November 18, however. The KMT claims Hou won 5 of the 6 polls, while the TPP claims Ko and Hou tied 3-3.<sup>[2]</sup>

- Hou, Ko, and former Taiwan president Ma Ying-Jeou (a KMT member, who mediated the deal) each designated a statistician to evaluate six polls that compared how a joint ticket led by each candidate would fare against Lai Ching-te. The “winner” in each poll would be whichever version of the joint ticket achieved a higher lead over Lai. If the difference between a Hou-Ke and a Ke-Hou joint ticket fell within the margin of error, Hou would be given the victory for that poll.<sup>[3]</sup>
- Ko’s main concession in the negotiation was his offer to accept a loss on any polls that showed the difference between him and Hou to be within the margin of error (estimated at 3%). Ko made this concession on November 3 after consistently polling above Hou for several weeks.<sup>[4]</sup> However, Hou closed the gap and even surpassed Ko in many polls during the last two weeks.<sup>[5]</sup> Including this concession in the deal significantly hurt Ko’s performance against Hou. When ignoring the margin of error, a Ko-Hou ticket outperformed a Hou-Ko ticket in five of the six polls.<sup>[6]</sup>
- Ko Wen-je claimed that the KMT demanded he concede on a 6% margin of error rather than the 3% margin he wanted, however. KMT Chairman Eric Chu denied the allegation and said a 3% margin of error means “plus or minus 3,” for a total range of six percentage points. Under Ko’s definition, a “3% margin of error” would mean 1.5 percentage points in either direction.<sup>[7]</sup> 3% is just an approximation as each poll has its own margin of error depending on its sample size, however.

Taiwanese media reported that the KMT-TPP agreement on November 15 was unfavorable to Ko, but it more closely resembles Ko’s earlier demands than any past proposal by the KMT.<sup>[8]</sup> Ko has consistently insisted the lead candidate of a joint ticket be determined by a nationwide poll. The KMT initially advocated for a primary election but dropped this demand because there was insufficient time before the November 24 candidate registration deadline. Later proposals by the KMT, such as incorporating polls of overall party support rather than just candidate support, or asking legislative nominees to vote, were also dropped.<sup>[9]</sup> The KMT also agreed to drop three of the initial nine polls it proposed to use in the November 15 deal, which the TPP perceived as favorable to the KMT.<sup>[10]</sup> Independent presidential candidate Terry Gou privately met with Ko Wen-je the day after the breakdown in the KMT-TPP deal and on November 22 released communications records from November 21 and 22 showing he has been trying to facilitate cooperation between Ko and Hou.

According to the records, Gou met with Ko on November 22 and called Hou multiple times. The records also said that Ko agreed to meet Gou and Hou in person on the same day in a meeting described as being focused on combining the KMT, TPP, and Gou's power to assist in achieving cooperation.[11] There is no evidence that this latter meeting happened as of late November 22.[12] Gou said when he announced his candidacy in August that his goal was to consolidate the anti-DPP opposition.[13] His actions on these two days are consistent with that goal. Running as an independent presidential candidate would further fragment the anti-DPP camp, however.

**TPP candidate Ko Wen-je is signaling he is prepared to run as a solo candidate but left open the possibility of reaching a new deal by November 24.** Ko told supporters on November 19 that he would not betray them and “fight to the end as the TPP candidate.”[14] He further said KMT-TPP cooperation may require working “to the last second” to ensure the strongest candidate would lead the ticket.[15] Hou Yu-Ih said on November 21 that he would wait for Ko Wen-je “until the last minute.”[16] He proposed each party name two statisticians to re-evaluate the nine polls originally designated in the KMT-TPP deal and broadcast the process, but Ko rejected this proposal.[17] KMT Chairman Eric Chu said November 22 was the KMT's deadline to come to a deal,[18] but no deal has been reached as of late November 22 local time. November 24 is the deadline for candidate registration. KMT-TPP cooperation has wide support from the constituencies of both parties and is seen as the only way to defeat frontrunner Lai Ching-te.[19]

**The breakdown of the KMT-TPP joint ticket deal benefits Lai Ching-te, who is the only registered presidential candidate for the election as of 22 November.** The fracturing of KMT-TPP cooperation allows the DPP to present itself as a united front in contrast to its opposition. Polling data suggests that Lai will be the frontrunner in the election, as he has consistently led in the polls. The absence of a joint KMT-TPP ticket removes a major obstacle to a Lai victory. Most polls, including the six that the KMT and TPP used in their negotiations, suggest that a joint ticket would enable the opposition parties to outperform the DPP in the elections regardless of whether Ko or Hou heads the joint ticket. Lai announced on November 20 that he had chosen Taiwan's representative to the United States Hsiao Bi-khim as his running mate. Hsiao resigned her post and the two officially registered their candidacy.[20]

Independent presidential candidate Terry Gou has not registered his candidacy as of November 22. Gou officially met the signature threshold to qualify as a candidate on November 14, six days ahead of the November 20 opening of candidate registration.[21] Gou is in a distant fourth place in the polls. His participation in the election would further fragment the opposition to the DPP.[22]

### PRC security developments

**The PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) denied the validity of alternative regional security frameworks in response to the Philippines' calls to establish an ASEAN-led South China Sea (SCS) code of conduct (COC).** ASEAN and the PRC signed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DOC) in 2002, a non-binding document that aimed to establish a framework for a subsequent formal COC.[23] The parties have failed to solidify a binding code during the last two decades amid the PRC's aggressive militarization of the SCS.[24] Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. stated the Philippines recently appealed to Malaysia and Vietnam to construct an ASEAN-led COC to establish a binding framework during a speech in Hawaii on November 19.[25] MFA Spokesperson Mao Ning declared “any agreement that deviates from the DOC framework is invalid” during a press conference on November 20.[26] The lack of unity among ASEAN and other Asia-

Pacific nations ensures the PRC's dominant military presence in the SCS remains unchallenged by a unified regional front.

The PRC's statements align with its strategy to thwart cohesion among Asia-Pacific nations in maritime security cooperation. PRC narratives consistently portray efforts to promote cohesion in Asia-Pacific security as disruptive to regional stability. State media outlet Global Times accused recent Japanese joint naval exercises with countries like the Philippines, Australia, and South Korea of bowing to a US-led containment strategy against the PRC.[27] The PRC Ministry of National Defense rebuked Japan's decision to share radar equipment with the Philippine military on November 16, labeling Japan a disruptor in the SCS.[28]

**President Xi Jinping lobbied for Fiji's support on "core issues" and advocated for a stronger "comprehensive strategic partnership" during a meeting with Prime Minister Sitivena Rebuka at the APEC forum on November 16.**[29] Xi also pledged the PRC's cooperation in the "Belt and Road" initiative, infrastructure, agriculture, and more to assist with Fiji's economic and social development.[30] This is consistent with the PRC's strategy of shoring up ties with non-US-aligned partners to strengthen its regional security foothold. The PRC's increasing diplomatic and economic engagement with Pacific Island states highlights the strategic importance of those states to furthering the PRC's security ambitions in the Asia-Pacific.

PRC state media emphasized the benefits that the Solomon Islands has reaped from the PRC's diplomatic and economic support in its coverage of the 2023 Pacific Games, an Oceania-focused multi-sport event that the Solomon Islands is hosting. The Global Times lauded the two countries' "comprehensive strategic partnership" as mutually beneficial, in contrast to the "colonial mindset" of the West.[31] The Global Times' framing is consistent with the PRC's efforts to style itself as a benevolent partner and present an alternative to what it characterizes as exploitative Western-style diplomacy. The PRC's close political support and infrastructure assistance to the Solomon Islands has already won its political victories. In 2022, the two nations signed a security pact that allows PRC vessels to replenish there and authorizes the deployment of People's Liberation Army (PLA) personnel to "maintain social order." [32]

**The PRC continues to use intimidation tactics to deter foreign military presence around the PRC.** Australia's Department of Defence revealed a Chinese warship sent out a sonar pulse in proximity to an Australian naval vessel in the East China Sea on November 14, injuring a diver.[33] The Australian vessel was within Japan's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and en route for a port visit.

This incident is the latest in a string of recent maritime confrontations between the PRC and foreign militaries. A PRC fighter jet intercepted a US Air Force bomber over international airspace in the SCS on October 24, flying within ten feet of the aircraft.[34] A PRC military aircraft confronted a Canadian Navy helicopter over international waters near the Paracel Islands on October 29, forcing the helicopter to take evasive action.[35]

#### Israel-Hamas War

**CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping called for convening a "more authoritative international peace conference" to promote a "just and lasting solution to the Palestinian issue" during a speech at a special BRICS leaders video summit on November 21.** He also stated his desire for an immediate ceasefire, ending collective punishments

against the people of Gaza, the necessity for humanitarian relief, and preventing the conflict from spreading across the Middle East.[36] His speech aimed to portray the PRC as a responsible international leader of non-Western countries by rhetorically supporting the Palestinian cause. The PRC leadership probably intends to side with the Palestinian cause in the event of an “authoritative” peace conference. PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi on November 20 called for Israel to “stop collective punishment of the people of Gaza” during a meeting with Arab leaders in Beijing.[37] Wang had met with officials from 18 countries and international organizations to discuss the Gaza war from October 8 to November 8, as ISW previously noted.[38] There have been no meetings between the PRC and Israel since Wang called Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen on October 24 to urge him to prevent the war from escalating.[39]

**Xi and Wang’s comments are consistent with the PRC’s efforts to use the Israel-Hamas War to bolster its image as a fair, responsible broker in contrast to the “biased” United States.** The PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and state propaganda outlets have repeatedly condemned violence between Palestine and Israel since October 7 but never condemned Hamas. They continue to call for an immediate ceasefire and promote a two-state solution based on the 1967 borders.[40] The PRC’s targeted criticism of Israel and call for an immediate ceasefire align with the views of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Arab states.[41] The lack of a tangible PRC articulated plan to bring about this ceasefire led to frustrated questioning by an Al Jazeera reporter at a November 15 PRC MFA press conference.[42]

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