

Cross-Strait Relations and the United States¹

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Cross-strait relations continue to improve because this trend is perceived as being in the interests of the three main actors: the governments of China, Taiwan, and the U.S. All sides recall negatively the turbulent and often dangerous conditions in cross strait relations that prevailed in the period following the visit to the United States of President Lee Teng-hui in 1995 until the end of the second term of President Chen Shui-bian in 2008. Against that background, the stability and easing to tensions resulting from President Ma Ying-jeou's more accommodating approach to China has been broadly welcomed. The Taiwan presidential election campaign caused some passing concern that past disruption might return if the opposition candidate, Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) leader Tsai Ying-wen, were elected. Tsai endeavored to move the DPP position on cross straits issues more toward the political center in Taiwan politics. Beijing remained wary and Tsai reportedly failed to reassure senior U.S. officials regarding her approach to China during a visit to Washington prior to the elections.

The re-election of President Ma Ying-jeou in early 2012 and its implications for Taiwan and cross strait relations were discussed at length among American specialists and in seven well attended think tank forums in Washington DC attended by this observer. At these meetings, American support for Ma and his cross strait approach seemed uniform. Subsequently, candidates for the Republican nomination for the U.S. presidential election

¹ Paper for panel on Washington-Taipei-Beijing triangle at Carnegie Endowment conference on cross strait relations July 12, 2012

in November occasionally registered disagreement on recent trends and issues involving Taiwan, notably President Obama's failure up to this time to meet President Ma's request to purchase 66 F-16 C/D warplanes.

The critiques came against a background of episodic attention to adverse implications of Chinese policies for important American interests by the Congress and the American media in the months before the November 2012 U.S. election. American public opinion also remains more negative than positive regarding the policies and practices of China. However, given the continuing and deep American preoccupations with a host of immediate and difficult policy problems at home and abroad, the critiques regarding arms sales to Taiwan and attitudes regarding several other China related issues have appeared to have limited implications. They serve to impede forward movement in Sino-American relations; they do not show significant change in continued U.S. reluctance to take steps that would cause serious difficulties in the current situation in U.S.-China relations. Thus, for example, a recent authoritative study of U.S. public opinion of China related issues including Taiwan showed that the U.S. public is somewhat anxious about Chinese economic and military power and policies, and its authoritarian political system and human rights practices. The American public favors U.S. efforts to strengthen American influence in Asia as a counterweight to China, but it eschews confrontation and conflict as it is "prepared to live peacefully and cooperatively" with China. The study underlined a continuing low level of American public support for U.S. military conflict with China over Taiwan.²

² Benjamin Page and Tiao Xie, *Living with the Dragon* (New York: Columbia University Press 2010)

Longer-term trends reflecting eroding U.S. support for Taiwan

This writer has endeavored elsewhere to assess what the recent trends in improving cross strait relations mean for Taiwan's freedom of action and its ultimate future.³ What he has found is that advances in cross strait relations often overshadow three sets of factors that ultimately determine Taiwan's future: (1) China's ever growing economic, military and international leverage over Taiwan, (2) indigenous Taiwan weakness, and (3) eroding US support. The first factor seems obvious; the latter two receive little systematic treatment. The assessment of these determinants shows that those many observers in Taiwan and abroad who believe Taiwan has preserved its freedom of action amid a vaguely defined "status quo" are mistaken. The three sets of factors show that Taiwan has gravitated to China's orbit, thereby making a decision to reverse the recent engagement with China unrealistic. Meanwhile, American support for a trajectory in cross strait relations that would risk major disruption with China for the sake of Taiwan has declined.

China's Strengths, Taiwan's Weaknesses

The military balance in the Taiwan Strait intimidates Taiwan and limits its freedom of action. China's impressive hardware targeting Taiwan grows in size and capability every year, while Taiwan falls further behind in meeting even basic goals of sustaining a level of defense spending equivalent to 3% of GDP. Arms sales from the United States reportedly are being delayed because of Taiwan defense budget shortfalls. The United

³ *Taiwan's Future: Narrowing Straits*, **NBR Analysis**, May 2011.

States' ability to intervene militarily in Taiwan contingencies remains strong, but the reluctance of U.S. leaders to do so grows, in part because China develops capabilities increasing significantly the cost of U.S. intervention.

Not long ago, Taiwan's vibrant economy was seen as comparable in international importance to China's. In 1995, Taiwan's economy was worth more than one-third the value of China's. Today, the Chinese economy is fifteen times larger than Taiwan's. Moreover, Taiwan's economic dependence on China is unsurpassed. Over one million Taiwan citizens are in China, mainly to conduct business.

Internationally, Taiwan recognizes that advances for Taiwan in world affairs now require Beijing's permission or acquiescence, even on issues as uncontroversial as trade.

Eroding U.S. support

The decline of U.S. support for Taiwan receives little attention and so is discussed at greater length here. Close examination shows that public support given by the Barack Obama government for Ma's cross-strait policies fails to hide the reduced overall U.S. backing for Taiwan, especially for actions that risk complicating U.S.-China relations for the sake of shoring up support for Taiwan.

U.S. policy today deters China's use of force against Taiwan, on the one hand, while sustaining conditions for a peaceful resolution of the China-Taiwan impasse, on the other.

This line of thinking in U.S. policy has existed since the normalization of relations with China and the breaking of official ties with Taiwan in the 1970s. Some of its advocates, notably Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski, placed less emphasis on deterring China and more emphasis on fostering conditions for a settlement of the Taiwan issue. At the time of the Taiwan Relations Act, passed in 1979, the line of thinking on Taiwan favored by U.S. leaders like Kissinger and Brzezinski was accompanied and often challenged by three other important segments of American elite and popular opinion that supported Taiwan for other reasons:

(1) A bipartisan group of leaders in Congress made clear that their support for Taiwan involved deterring China's use of force, while buying time—a long time—for conditions to develop in ways advantageous to Taiwan. In this way, they sought to ensure that any settlement of the impasse would be more favorable to Taiwan than one carried out under existing circumstances, which they viewed as putting the island at a distinct disadvantage.

(2) Others in Congress and the U.S. government—in particular, the Reagan administration—believed that strong U.S. support for Taiwan buttressed Washington's ability to create a strategic environment in the Asia-Pacific where China would be compelled to cooperate more closely with the United States and accommodate the status quo in the Taiwan Strait. They were interested in using U.S. relations with Taiwan as a means to shape the trajectory of China's rising influence in the region and world affairs.

(3) Some conservative congressional members and opinion leaders opposed the break in relations with Taiwan for the sake of establishing relations with China on the grounds that the Communist administration on the mainland could not be trusted.

In short, the strengthening of U.S. relations with Taiwan at the time of the Taiwan Relations Act and in subsequent years owed a lot to the work of congressional and administration officials, and various non-government advocates, who were not focused on sustaining conditions for a settlement of the Taiwan-China impasse. The congressional advocates appeared personally committed to their positions and were prepared to bear the consequences of opposing moves they viewed as abandoning Taiwan and pushing it into a resolution with China.

Congressional as well as media support for Taiwan rose as it became a democracy while China killed dissidents in Tiananmen Square and the demise of the Soviet bloc undercut the main rationale for U.S. support for China. Congress was almost uniform in pressing President Clinton to grant Taiwan president Lee Teng-hui a visa in 1995. However, unlike in the case of the Taiwan Relations Act, congressional support proved fickle and thin as the earlier backers of Taiwan fell silent when China reacted with threatening military exercises. The Clinton administration eventually saw the Chinese moves as so serious that it sent two aircraft carrier battle groups to the region to deter China. For the rest of Clinton's tenure, congressional Republicans vocally supported Taiwan and attacked Clinton's efforts to reassure China over Taiwan. However, these efforts seemed

driven more by expedient and partisan reasons focused on discrediting the president than by any steadfast commitment to Taiwan.

The George W. Bush administration entered office with strong determination to shore up U.S. support for Taiwan as part of a broader effort to strengthen U.S. alliances and friendships in the Asia-Pacific in order to influence Chinese policies and practices in directions favored by the United States. This effort collapsed as Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian exploited U.S. support by seeking pro-independence initiatives that provoked strong political and military reaction by China. U.S. contacts with Chen were cut back sharply, and differences between the two administrations came into public view. Few in Congress were willing to travel to Taiwan, voice support for its leader and his policies, or take steps to counter Bush administration pressure on Chen to curb provocations of China.

Contrasting the Obama government's approach to Taiwan with the early George W. Bush administration's or with earlier highpoints of U.S. support for Taiwan suggests how U.S. support has eroded. Administration officials today seem firm in efforts to deter China's use of force, but the changing military balance in the Taiwan Strait underscores Washington's reluctance to face a Taiwan contingency. U.S. support for Ma's rapprochement with China is seen positively as sustaining conditions for an eventual peaceful resolution.

Little is heard from those Americans who advocated strengthening Taiwan's position vis-à-vis China in order to buy time for Taipei to wait for better conditions for negotiations. The anti-Communist sentiment that drove some congressional and other leaders to support Taiwan in the past seems negligible. In contrast to the early Bush years, the current government has not emphasized Taiwan playing a role in ongoing U.S. efforts to shore up a strategic environment in the Asia-Pacific that would compel China to behave in ways compatible with U.S. interests. The Obama administration's broad and multifaceted diplomatic, security, and other initiatives in the region collectively represent the most important shift in regional dynamics in several years. Although Washington has increased its engagement across the Asia-Pacific—ranging from India to the Pacific Islands—the major speeches and pronouncements on re-engagement with the region usually avoid discussing any upgrading of relations with Taiwan. The Taiwan government reciprocates and appears to reinforce this U.S. posture. In contrast with the public support of the governments of South Korea, Japan, ASEAN, India, and other Asia-Pacific countries for the Obama administration's greater regional activism, Taiwan has maintained a low public profile.

Republican control of the House of Representatives has revived partisan reasons for some congressional members to support Taiwan, but the fact remains that few members visit the island and those that do sometimes come away with views adverse to Taiwan's interests. The fracturing of the Taiwan lobby in Washington has resulted in confusion and a decline in Taiwan's influence.

Conclusions

American support for Ma Ying-jeou's efforts to ease tensions in cross strait relations will continue. Those Americans dissatisfied with Taiwan's growing dependence on China and what this might imply for Taiwan's and America's interests seem a distinct minority. Because of the partisan debate in the American election campaign, if Republican candidate Mitt Romney wins the November 2012 election, he will have to decide whether and how to follow through with his campaign criticism of President Obama for not selling F-16 fighters to Taiwan. If he moves ahead forthrightly with such a sale, thereby risking strong retaliation from China, his approach will represent a departure from the recent pattern of American leaders in the Bush and Obama governments seeking to sidestep issues that risk major negative disruption with China for the sake of Taiwan or other reasons during a prolonged period of U.S. preoccupations with other higher priority issues at home and abroad. Whether such a decision will garner substantial domestic American support in light of likely strong Chinese retaliation and negative implications for regional stability remains to be seen and appears less than likely under prevailing conditions.