In trying to understand U.S. Taiwan policy, it is essential to understand two vital facts. First, the “Taiwan question” is the only issue in the world that could lead to major power war, indeed a war between two nuclear powers, the United States and China. But, second, cross-Taiwan Strait relations are at their heart political in nature, and issues that are involved in them can only be resolved through political means. Thus, while there could be military confrontation or even conflict if one side or the other either acted recklessly or miscalculated the intentions or tolerance of the other, such action could not resolve the issue. That is, even if military confrontation led to a new situation in the short term, it would be virtually certain to lay a foundation for years, perhaps decades, of tension as the “losing” side sought to reverse the outcome of the conflict.

Even in as tense a period as we have recently witnessed, leaders on both sides of the Strait have acted with sufficient prudence to avoid a crisis. Moreover, trends on both sides fortunately are now moving in the direction, not of permanent resolution, but of a new political framework in which peace and stability can be consolidated.

The election in Taiwan on March 22 saw the overwhelming victory of former Taipei mayor, Ma Ying-jeou, a man who has a fundamental commitment to moderation and to seeking a more stable and sustainable *modus vivendi* with the PRC as well as restored trust with the United States.

Whether he will be successful in the cross-Strait aspects of his policy, however, will depend on three things: forging a political consensus within Taiwan, gaining active PRC cooperation in creating a new political framework across the Strait, and U.S. willingness to cooperate with measures that the two sides might reach voluntarily and without
coercion. In thinking about this it is also critical to observe that “unification” is not on the table, not now, and likely not for at least several decades.

Regarding forging a domestic consensus within Taiwan, Ma Ying-jeou has expressed his determination to reach out to the DPP and the 42 percent of the voters who did not support him in the election. It will be crucial that he follow through on that commitment. It is also crucial, however, that the DPP respond in kind, not only playing its appropriate role of “loyal opposition” but also cooperating with Ma’s initiatives for the sake of Taiwan’s larger interests. There may be differences between the parties—or even within them—about the appropriate course. Yet even the DPP candidate, Frank Hsieh Chang-ting, was urging many of the same measures as Ma has espoused, so it should not be impossible to agree on the broad outlines of a new, and more moderate, approach.

As to the PRC, I think one can be hopeful in that regard, as over the past five years we have witnessed the coming to power of a leadership on the Mainland, largely personified by President and General Secretary Hu Jintao himself, which has shifted its focus from pressing for reunification within a finite timeframe to one that is characterized by greater patience. The PRC is, of course, determined to block what it terms de jure Taiwan independence through constitutional change, and to achieve eventual reunification. But for now, and for as far as the mind’s eye can see, it seeks to weave a fabric of positive cross-Strait relationships that will facilitate growth of interdependence and foster favorable attitudes in Taiwan that will make achieving that ultimate goal feasible.

We are all quite familiar with the fact that the People’s Liberation Army is modernizing in impressive ways. While the pace of that modernization has not been urgent, nonetheless it has hardly been laggardly since it began in the early 1990s, and it is achieving impressive results. This presents both a more formidable “threat” to Taiwan in terms of capabilities, and a growing challenge to the U.S. ability to act as the stabilizer and balancer. This is true not only in terms of the U.S. role in cross-Strait issues but also in terms of the Western Pacific in general.
I do not intend to dwell on specific aspects of China’s military modernization, but I think it is important to say this much. Despite the PLA’s successes—and these are particularly important in some asymmetrical “niche” areas that can complicate any U.S. mission in the area—overall the U.S. retains significant military superiority over China and is already taking a number of steps to maintain it in the face of the Chinese advances. Whether what we do will be enough, and whether it is conducted in a way that does not provoke yet further and faster developments on the Chinese side, is a vital matter not just for the Taiwan issue, but for the larger strategic relationship between Beijing and Washington. And just as PLA modernization, though importantly shaped by the Taiwan issue today, is not by any means solely driven by that issue, U.S. China-related decisions about weapons systems, deployment patterns, force structure and so forth are importantly focused not only on a short-term concern for meeting a Taiwan contingency, but they have a longer-term goal in mind, as well.

The PRC also needs to change course with respect to Taiwan’s “international space.” No one should hold the illusion that Beijing will compromise on the principle of sovereignty and the PRC insistence that it represents the sole legal government of China, which includes both Taiwan and the Mainland. But within that framework, there is room for a great deal of flexibility if Beijing is confident, as it should be with Ma taking power, that Taiwan is not pushing for de jure independence.

A perfect place to start would be with the World Health Assembly, the executive arms of the World Health Organization. Taipei has applied for “observer” status for several years, only to be blocked on each occasion by Beijing, even though such status would not raise issues relating to sovereignty. Last year, the Chen Shui-bian government, in addition to making its usual bid for observer status, also applied for membership. While that complicated matters—since membership is only open to sovereign states, something that not only Beijing but the United States and most other nations reject in Taiwan’s case—that should not get in the way of agreeing to the non-sovereign observer role that Taipei seeks. As the WHA begins its meeting this year on the eve of Ma’s inauguration, shifting gears would be universally seen as a goodwill gesture in anticipation of Ma’s less confrontational and more cooperative approach to cross-Strait relations. And this would
contribute, in turn, to creating the sort of domestic consensus we have already identified as indispensable for Ma’s ability to persist in the course he has chosen.

As to the United States, to state up front my position on the fundamental question we are addressing here today, I believe that the U.S. “one China policy” has served us well, protecting and promoting vital American national interests, and that there is no viable alternative. Seven American presidents have come to the same conclusion, even though some of them, most notably Ronald Reagan, took a while to get there. Could it be tweaked here or there? Undoubtedly, though I imagine my vision of such tweaking may be more modest that the view of at least a couple of the other panelists. But in its fundamentals, it remains the only sensible course open to us.

As we think about what adjustments in implementation might work, we should keep in mind that maintaining peace and stability is the fundamental American goal, just as it is a fundamental goal of Taiwan and the PRC. So all proposals should be judged against the standard of whether they would contribute to maintaining and strengthening peace and stability or not.

As I have indicated, the key issue across the Strait is sovereignty. The United States took a decision on that question thirty years ago, when it switched relations from Taipei to Beijing even as it continued to decline, as it had since World War II, to take a definitive stance on the issue of Taiwan island’s sovereignty. That is, in 1979 we broke relations with the Republic of China and recognized the government of the People’s Republic of China as the “sole legal government” of China, but we did not take a stance on whether Taiwan was part of China. Our position evolved from that of Harry Truman in 1950 that an international act of some sort needed to take place to determine that status, and as early as the 1960s we adopted a position that said it was a matter to be decided by the two sides themselves. But we continued, as we had in all the years before, to view the manner of that settlement—which we insisted be peaceful and non-coercive—as a matter of vital American national interest. That did not tell anyone what we would specifically do in the event that the PRC attempted to resolve the sovereignty question by non-peaceful means,
but it lay at the heart of not only our strategic ambiguity about that question, and also of our arms sales policy to Taiwan that has been so irksome to Beijing.

As to Beijing and Taipei’s views of this, at the moment they take quite incompatible stands, and this will be the case even after the inauguration of the new Taiwan government in May. The PRC asserts that there is only one China to which both Taiwan and the Mainland belong, that sovereignty and territory are indivisible, and that the only legitimate government of that one China resides in Beijing.

Even under the incoming Taiwan administration of Ma Ying-jeou, a fundamental fact is that the government and people consider Taiwan—or the Republic of China, depending on your political preference—to be a sovereign state that does not come under Beijing’s sovereignty or jurisdiction and that deserves to be recognized and represented in the international community in its own right. While outgoing President Chen Shui-bian has pressed the case that “Taiwan is Taiwan, and China is China, and they have nothing to do with one another,” Ma will adopt a position articulated as “one China, respective interpretations.” If pressed, he will define his “one China” as “The Republic of China,” just as Beijing defines its as “The People’s Republic of China.” Neither side will endorse the other’s position, of course, but both can live with these contradictory claims, as they share the common position that there is “one China,” even if they disagree about what it is. Ma, and one hopes Beijing, will then seek to set the matter aside because it is simply not productive for either side to press its case. In light of charges by his political opponents on the island that Ma will “sell out” Taiwan—charges I personally do not credit at all, it is important to note that Ma wants to set the issue aside not because he really differs with the view that sovereignty belongs to the people of Taiwan; like the DPP, he agrees. But he understands that pressing this issue as the Chen Administration has done has proven unproductive, indeed counterproductive and even dangerous. And in the process, it has alienated Taiwan’s one solid, major friend, the United States.

In any tweaking to be done to the current U.S. policy, I would argue not only that all of these realities need to be taken into account, and that challenges on the sovereignty issue should be avoided, but also that we should be cognizant of various promises made by the
United States as Sino-American Normalization proceeded and developed over the years. Some commitments were explicit, some were tacit, and some became policy through consistent modes of behavior. But they stand as part of our “one China” policy today, and should be changed only after the most careful consideration.

One of the questions posed to the panelists was whether U.S. policy is designed to “kick the can down the road” until circumstances change on one side of the Strait or the other—or both—in a way that allows for peaceful and non-coercive “unification.” I would accept the notion of temporizing, but I would rephrase the goal. I think U.S. policy is designed to preserve peace and stability until some longer-term, peaceful, non-coercive settlement is feasible, whatever that might be. And because this could take a very long time—probably measured in decades—I think it is important that U.S. policy continues to play a vital role in doing just that.

The “one China” policy has helped to maintain a robust comprehensive relationship with Taipei as well as to preserve the security and well-being of the people of Taiwan. At the same time, it has allowed the United States to develop an increasingly productive relationship with the PRC across virtually the entire range of human activity. Were we to promote one outcome or another for Taiwan—unification or independence, or something in between—we not only would be arrogating to ourselves a right that is not ours, but we would inevitably end up supporting one side or the other on key issues. The only predictable result would be that the benefits American policy has achieved so far would be out the window. Thus, I believe we are quite correct to maintain that the “what” of cross-Strait relations is not “our issue,” but the “how” of it is indeed a matter in which we have a vital stake and so we must and will continue to play a pivotal role.

The conference outline suggests that the policy is complex and confusing. It certainly is complex and I’m sure is often confusing in the minds of those who deal with it only occasionally and at a broad policy level. In fact, it was concern about the lack of deep understanding of the policy by presidents, secretaries of state and national security advisers that led me to write a book about it a few years back, what I hoped might become a primer. The policy has often been misstated by presidents and their chief
national security teams, not because they necessarily intended to change it, but because they didn’t understand it. And each of those un-nuanced statements has been seized on by one side or the other either to bolster its own claims or as a reason to take steps to counter what it perceived as a shifting U.S. position, with predictably unhelpful results. Still, and with some obvious detours along the way, overall American Taiwan policy has been remarkably consistent in its fundamentals.

For all of their concerns about aspects of PRC policy and actions, including the crackdown we have been witnessing in Tibet, Americans have for over 35 years recognized that the PRC is a nation of enormous and growing importance to U.S. economic, security and even political interests. It was not merely a matter of romanticism that created the broad support for President Nixon’s opening with China in the early 1970s; it was the recognition that, despite what was arguably a far harsher and more ideological regime than the Soviets had at that point, the U.S. national interest required it.

Granted, the later collapse of the Soviet Union removed an important element that had driven the Nixon Administration’s opening to Beijing. Some might argue that this evolution should have led to a reexamination of the U.S. “one China” policy. But China’s economic and military rise have taken the place of these strategic interests in a way that is of far more enduring importance than the Kremlin’s challenge was destined to be. And when Michael Swaine originally sought to shape this event in the form of a sharply defined pro-and-con debate about maintaining the “one China” policy, he found few takers on the “con” side of the argument. Hence the differences among the panelists in this event, while not insignificant, are more nuanced than they are stark alternatives.

At the time of the U.S. opening to Beijing, Taiwan was still under an authoritarian regime that continued for some time to repress its own citizens in cruel ways. Still, it had been a wartime ally and had enjoyed very strong political support in the Congress, so Washington was not willing to merely cut it loose. Fortunately, changes in Taiwan have been largely positive, indeed quite remarkable in terms of its economic development and political democratization. So, even though we eventually did make the shift in diplomatic relations and end our formal security treaty commitment to the Republic of China, simply
letting a society as impressive as Taiwan’s be taken over by force, despite our lack of a formal commitment to come to its aid, increasingly seemed not only to challenge U.S. principles but also to likely challenge the credibility of our commitments elsewhere in the region. Thus, powerful new reasons emerged to work to avoid a forceful resolution of cross-Strait relations. Those reasons were not so strong that we should contemplate restoring diplomatic relations with Taipei or reversing our position of “not challenging” the PRC’s claims re sovereignty (even though we do not accept them). Nor do they tell us what an American president would do if and when confronted with an actual situation. But they do argue persuasively for a continuing U.S. role based on current policy to maintain the status quo of peace and stability—and to deepen that situation—until some outcome more acceptable to the two sides emerges.

Having said that it was hard to find any “takers” on the proposition of changing the “one China” policy, in fact there are some people who would argue for a change. On the one hand are those who say that we should simply “recognize reality,” that Taiwan (or the Republic of China) is a sovereign, independent state with all the attributes of such status and that it deserves to be freed from the shackles of an outmoded and unjustified claim by Beijing. Just as in Taiwan itself, this American bridling at current policy stems in part from the rigid PRC stance in suppressing Taiwan’s international participation, not only in governmental organizations but in non-governmental organizations, as well.

Others would argue that the current situation is simply too precarious and fraught with dangers for the United States to seek to manage it as indirectly as we have till now. They would have the U.S. play a pro-active role in bringing about at least some interim arrangements across the Strait that involve essentially a trade-off of a Taiwan commitment not to move to de jure independence in exchange for a PRC commitment not to use force or intimidation. In fact, both Ma Ying-jeou and Hu Jintao have endorsed the idea of a cross-Strait peace accord. Whether that means we will end up with one is far from clear; certainly there will be nothing of the sort in the very early part of Ma’s administration. But at least there could be some serious consideration of this as time passes, with the initiative coming from the parties themselves.
Still others believe that the long-term American stakes are simply too great and the costs of maintaining the current, highly-nuanced policy too high, and so we must seek to actively facilitate movement toward not merely peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues, including perhaps interim arrangements, but something that would clearly be directed at ultimate peaceful unification. Underlying this position is an assumption that independence is simply not an option for Taiwan, so even if the final forms of unification might not be totally discernible at this point, gaining agreement in principle to that outcome would be highly stabilizing, and would relieve the United States of a major security concern.

I would oppose either moving in any way toward accepting Taiwan as a sovereign, independent state or trying to force resolution of cross-Strait relations in favor of unification. As I have said, backing particular outcomes would be neither appropriate nor wise. I am also leery of becoming too activist in an effort to forge an interim cross-Strait arrangement, not because I would oppose it—I would not, and I think it is vital that the United States make clear it will indeed accept any arrangement worked out peacefully and non-coercively between the two sides—but because it would be hard not to become trapped into positions that would offend one side or the other, likely undermining the very purposes that drove our policy in the first place. So, while we should remain ready to be helpful if called upon by both sides to contribute, and we should make unambiguous our support for rapprochement across the Strait—as President Bush has now done, I would urge that the United States not take initiatives designed to drive toward a particular interim or long-term outcome.

Does all of this add up to a situation in which people in Taiwan can exhale and feel satisfied that they have achieved the status and recognition they merit for their achievements? No, it doesn’t. Does it give Beijing satisfaction that its deeply held conviction about the sovereignty of “one China” is respected by the United States? No, again. But it allows the people of Taiwan to live in safety in an increasingly prosperous and democratic society. And it plays a major role in ensuring that Taiwan does not, in fact, move toward de jure independence, and thus contributes to a peaceful international
environment that allows the PRC to focus on its own priority task of economic development. And, by doing all of this, it serves vital American interests.