



## **What Hu Jintao Should Expect: Predictions about Obama Administration Policy toward Taiwan** by Bonnie S. Glaser

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Taiwan remains one of the most sensitive and divisive issues between the United States and China. What should Chinese President Hu Jintao expect from President Obama on this critically important issue? Until the new president is sworn in and key personnel are confirmed, the new administration's policy will remain uncertain. Moreover, the overall framework as well as detailed policies will emerge gradually; a comprehensive policy statement on Taiwan is unlikely to be issued. Nevertheless, it may be useful to make some predictions. Below are eight policy objectives that are likely to be pursued by the Obama administration. They represent the musings of an independent scholar and interested observer with no special inside knowledge or access to the president-elect.

### *1. Promote positive-sum relations among the U.S., China, and Taiwan*

Under President Obama, the U.S. will seek to alter the zero-sum nature of relations among the U.S., China, and Taiwan that has often prevailed in the past. Improvement in Mainland-Taiwan ties will be welcomed and encouraged, perhaps even more so than under President Bush. Cooperation between Beijing and Washington will not come at Taiwan's expense. Stronger U.S.-Taiwan relations will not be aimed at pressuring China. The creation of positive-sum relationships will be the overarching strategic goal that guides specific policy formulation. This adjustment will be carried out because doing so serves American security interests.

### *2. Repair and strengthen U.S.-Taiwan relations*

Taipei and Washington are working to repair their relations, which were badly frayed during Chen Shui-bian's second term in office. China should expect the U.S. to take steps to bolster U.S.-Taiwan relations, but this should not be misconstrued as intended to slow or impede progress in cross-Strait ties. The maintenance of strong U.S.-Taiwan relations is in the interest of the United States. Taiwan is the United States' ninth-largest trading partner; Taiwan's two-way trade with the United States was \$58 billion in 2007. Pursuant to the Taiwan Relations Act, which is U.S. domestic law, the U.S. provides Taiwan with arms of a defensive character and maintains the capacity to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan. Moreover, the U.S. has an abiding interest in Taiwan's advancement as a vibrant democracy.

Staunch U.S. support for Taiwan is especially important to provide Taiwan's President Ma Ying-jeou with confidence to continue to negotiate with Beijing in an effort to achieve a more stable and sustainable *modus vivendi*. Look for the resumption of visits to Taiwan by U.S. Cabinet officials responsible for such issues as trade, agriculture, transportation, and energy, which were suspended during Chen Shui-bian's tenure due to friction between Taipei and Washington. In addition, bilateral economic agreements may be signed, for example to promote bilateral investment and end double taxation. Ma Ying-jeou can be expected to receive far better treatment during transit stops in the U.S. than Chen experienced in his latter years in office, but transits will still be guided by the principles of providing for the safety, comfort, convenience, and dignity of Taiwan's president.

### *3. Encourage further improvement in cross-Strait relations*

The Obama administration will seek to dispel suspicions on both sides of the Strait that U.S. interests are not served by an easing of Mainland-Taiwan tensions. The decade-long hiatus in cross-Strait dialogue was dangerous: it resulted in greater misunderstanding and an increased risk of miscalculation that could lead to military conflict.

The U.S. will continue to encourage cross-Strait negotiations that seek solutions to problems and peaceful settlement of differences. No steps will be taken to undermine the improvement in cross-Strait ties. On the contrary, the Obama administration will be cautious in making policy decisions so as not to derail cross-Strait progress.

### *4. Make no changes in the "one China" policy, but possibly modify the rhetoric*

The three Sino-U.S. Joint Communiqués and the Taiwan Relations Act will remain the basis of the U.S. "one China" policy. The Obama administration will also continue the policy of not supporting Taiwan independence. U.S. opposition to any unilateral change in the status quo by either side of the Taiwan Strait – another component of the mantra that comprises the current "one China" policy – may be dropped. This formulation was added by the Bush administration to warn Chen Shui-bian to avoid provoking the Mainland and dragging the U.S. into a war in the Strait. Ma Ying-jeou's pragmatic approach to Beijing and his policy of easing cross-Strait tensions make this statement no longer necessary.

If China seeks to convince the Obama administration to explicitly endorse the peaceful reunification of Taiwan and the Mainland, it is not likely to achieve success. The United States will likely retain its focus on process and insist that there be a peaceful resolution of differences between the two sides of Strait, while remaining agnostic on the outcome. It is up to China to persuade the Taiwanese people of the desirability of

an amalgamation of some form with the Mainland. The U.S. will not press Taiwan to accept Beijing's proposed solutions. In that regard, it would be best if China abandons the effort to promote "co-management" of the Taiwan issue with the United States.

#### *5. Call for China to reduce its military deployments opposite Taiwan*

The Obama administration will press China harder to ease the military threat to Taiwan. Despite the resumption of dialogue between the quasi-official intermediary bodies of two sides of the Strait and the signing of six agreements in the past six months, Beijing has yet to take steps to significantly change its military posture toward Taiwan.

Ma Ying-jeou has called for the elimination of China's missiles as a precondition to engaging in negotiations on security and military issues. While China cannot be expected to relinquish its deterrent against Taiwan independence prior to the signing of a peace accord, Beijing can nevertheless make goodwill gestures now such as freezing short-range ballistic missile deployments, pulling back a number of missiles so they cannot be fired unless redeployed forward, and modifying its military exercises in a way that signals intent to lower the threat. The Obama administration is likely to support military confidence-building measures in the Taiwan Strait that lower the risk of accidental conflict and build trust between the two long-estranged militaries.

#### *6. Firmly support greater participation by Taiwan in international organizations*

Chen Shui-bian's policy of seeking to join the United Nations and UN-affiliated organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) under the name Taiwan made it difficult for the United States to support expansion of Taiwan's participation in the international community. Under Ma Ying-jeou, Taipei has adopted a more realistic approach that seeks meaningful participation for the Republic of China in the United Nations and observer status in the World Health Assembly, the executive arm of the WHO. The Obama administration can be expected to fully back Taiwan in these efforts, as they are consistent with the U.S. policy of supporting Taiwan's involvement, but not membership, in state-based international organizations.

If Beijing can accommodate Taiwan's participation in international organizations that require sovereignty for admission and its membership in international NGOs, then this issue need not become a point of contention between the U.S. and China.

#### *7. Maintain a robust security relationship with Taiwan*

U.S. policy toward Taiwan under President Obama will be founded in part on the belief that neither an insecure and vulnerable Taiwan nor an overconfident Taiwan will negotiate with the Mainland. Therefore, the U.S. will seek to create an environment in which Taiwan feels secure, yet has incentives to sustain dialogue with Beijing. Toward this end, the U.S. will take the steps outlined above to bolster economic and political ties with Taiwan and support Taiwan's quest for enhanced participation in international organizations.

President Bush's approval of the \$6.5 billion arms sales package removed the need to consider weapons sales to Taiwan in the early months of the Obama administration. However, arms sales will remain under consideration, especially new fighter jets. China's military posture toward Taiwan will be the critical variable in any arms sale decision, along with Taiwan's requests for defensive weapons to defend itself against a Chinese attack. Beijing should not seek a solution to the problem of U.S. arms sales to Taiwan in a U.S.-China deal such as the one that Jiang Zemin floated at President Bush's Crawford ranch in 2002, which proposed a possible reduction in China's missile buildup against Taiwan in exchange for a reduction in U.S. arms sales to Taiwan. Rather, it is up to Beijing and Taipei to resolve this, like other matters, through political dialogue. It should be kept in mind, however, that a significant reduction in the military threat to Taiwan posed by the Mainland would likely reduce Taipei's interest in purchasing arms from the U.S.

#### *8. Support Taiwan's democratic system*

The Obama administration will support a healthy democratic system in Taiwan that reflects the aspirations of the Taiwanese people. President Obama may not refer explicitly to Taiwan as a beacon of democracy as did President Bush, but he will undoubtedly find ways to signal his hope that Taiwan, as well as other regional democracies, will serve as examples that encourage the development of greater democracy on the Mainland.

As the 2012 Taiwan presidential elections approach, Beijing should not anticipate any efforts by the United States to influence the outcome. U.S. involvement in Taiwan's 2008 elections to discourage the passage of referenda that could have resulted in cross-Strait military conflict should be seen as exceptional. Bluntly stated, the U.S. will not work with Beijing to keep the KMT in power. That decision will be left to the Taiwanese people.