



Dangerous Misconceptions About Taiwan

by Robert M. Hathaway

I have just returned from a visit to Taiwan, where I talked with a broad range of politicians, officials, academics, and policy analysts. I deliberately sought out individuals holding varying views, and I feel confident that the opinions I encountered were representative of those held by a wider public in Taiwan. What I heard troubled me.

Specifically, I heard well-informed and respected people espouse ideas about Taiwan and the United States that strike me as serious misconceptions. Misinformation under any circumstance is to be regretted. But if policy is based upon an inadequate or erroneous understanding, then misinformation can become dangerous rather than merely regrettable. Among the misconceptions I ran into, five stand out.

1. The Clinton administration is so eager to cultivate good ties with Beijing that it is prepared to sacrifice Taiwan's interests.

Not true. Granted, the Clinton administration has on occasion taken steps, such as President Clinton's enunciation of the "three no's" in Shanghai in 1998, that have caused uneasiness among many of Taiwan's people.

Even so, it is inconceivable that Clinton would be prepared to abandon Taiwan in order to curry favor with China. Masterful politician that he is, Clinton must surely know that neither the American people nor the Congress would be prepared to support such a course.

Instead, the actions of the Clinton administration are governed by the conviction that Taiwan's security, prosperity, and democracy are all best safeguarded if the United States and the PRC can establish at least a tolerably decent working relationship. Of course, the wisdom of specific policies pursued by the administration, including public articulation, in China, of the "three no's," can be debated. But no one should think that an anti-Taiwan animus or even an apathy toward Taiwan's legitimate interests explains administration actions.

2. The next American president, especially if George W. Bush wins the White House, is likely to be far more solicitous of Taiwan's interests.

This is no doubt a comforting thought to many people on Taiwan, but it is supported by neither logic nor nearly three decades of historical experience.

In fact, there has been remarkable continuity to America's China policy ever since Richard Nixon first visited the PRC in 1972. Six presidents, from both major political parties, have followed essentially the same policy toward Beijing – what today is labeled "engagement." The explanation for this consistency is simple: there has existed in the United States since 1972 a widespread consensus that such an approach to

the world's most populous state offers the best opportunity for promoting important global and regional American interests. Parenthetically, this U.S. policy of engagement toward China has also established an environment within which Taiwan has flourished.

No doubt a new president, and especially a Republican president, will set out to place his (or her) own mark on America's China policy. Clinton-skeptics would do well to recall that candidate Clinton campaigned in 1992 denouncing the first George Bush for coddling the "butchers of Beijing." A Clinton foreign policy, Governor Clinton promised, would place human rights at the very center of America's China policy. And so President Clinton did, with predictably unhappy results. Within a year or so, Clinton's approach toward China swung back very much into accord with that followed by all his predecessors, including the much-maligned George Bush. One should not be surprised to see a similar process unfold following the inauguration next January of Clinton's successor.

As for the related idea that Republicans are more sympathetic toward Taiwan than Democrats, it is worth recalling that many Chinese appear to believe that Republicans are more inclined than Democrats to be well-disposed toward China. Beijing has never had better friends than Republicans Richard Nixon and George Bush, they contend.

China and Taiwan cannot both be right here. In fact, I think neither are. For every Jesse Helms or Tom Delay in the Republican party, there's a Chuck Hagel or a Phil Crane, senior GOP lawmakers who have worked hard to stabilize the U.S.-PRC relationship. For every Pat Buchanan, there's a George Bush senior. Skepticism toward China and support for Taiwan are not the exclusive properties of either American political party.

3. Taiwan should look to the U.S. Congress to protect its interests since the White House and the State Department are not to be trusted.

Such advice, should it be translated into Taiwan's policy, would be extraordinarily dangerous for Taipei. In the American system of government, and under the American constitution, the President has the responsibility for conducting U.S. foreign policy. Moreover, as commander-in-chief of the armed forces, he has the final say on defense and national security issues. And no president, of either party, is going to cede this authority to Congress.

Congress is not set up to conduct foreign policy. It has neither the expertise nor the resources nor the tools. It is better at obstructing executive branch desires than at launching initiatives or fashioning policy of its own. More often than not, Congress exercises its role in the foreign policy process

by hemming in the executive, by telling the president and the State Department what they cannot do.

There are exceptions to this pattern, of course, but generally those who look to the Congress to lead have been disappointed. And were Taipei to play this game, it would risk antagonizing the very executive branch whose backing Taiwan needs. Yes, Taiwan should cultivate its friends in the Congress. But Taipei would be foolhardy to try to use its congressional support to manipulate the executive branch.

Taiwan should also remember that most members of Congress are interested primarily in domestic issues and domestic politics. Even initiatives that look as if they are intended to promote Taiwan's interests – such as the Taiwan Security Enhancement Act now making its way through Congress, or calls to provide Taiwan with American-designed theater missile defense (TMD) technology – have as much or more to do with U.S. domestic politics as with Taiwan's security.

4. President Lee Teng-hui's July statement that relations between China and Taiwan are "special state-to-state relations" was only a recognition of reality, and did not change or challenge the status quo.

As a recognition of Taiwan's growing isolation from the PRC, President Lee's statement may have been little more than a frank assessment of the situation on the ground. But in international politics there are multiple realities and multiple status quos. One reality is that the diplomatic fiction of one-China has injected a large element of stability in the Taiwan Strait and enabled Taipei, Beijing, and Washington to manage successfully what otherwise might have proved insurmountable – let alone dangerous – differences.

President Lee may indeed have reflected prevailing opinion in Taiwan, but the impression that was subsequently fostered that Taiwan was abandoning the one-China framework introduced a provocative new element into the already tense PRC-Taiwan-U.S. triangle. It is difficult to see how this promoted either Taiwan's security or U.S.-Taiwan relations.

5. Corruption and money politics can coexist with democracy in Taiwan.

The people of Taiwan make a serious miscalculation if they allow this belief to take hold. I found a widespread disgust with the role that money plays in Taiwan's politics, but an even wider expectation that vote buying and the improper use of the powers of incumbency by the KMT could influence the outcome of the March presidential election. Corrupt politics is more or less accepted in Taiwan, one newspaper editor observed during my visit.

Maybe so, but I can think of few things more likely to undercut the favorable view of Taiwan most Americans currently hold. There are many arguments – political, economic, strategic – in favor of close U.S.- Chinese ties. But Taiwan enjoys one clear advantage the PRC does not have. For most Americans, Taiwan's thriving political democracy outweighs the many "reasons of state" for a U.S.-PRC partnership. Indeed, democracy is Taiwan's most precious asset.

For the people of Taiwan to permit corrupt politics and crooked politicians to destroy this precious jewel in the Taiwanese crown would be criminal. It would also rob Taipei of the single most compelling reason for the United States to maintain its special concern for Taiwan's well-being. Equally tragic, corruption and money politics denies the people of Taiwan the opportunity to have the final say in matters of fundamental importance to their future.

I should add that I did not encounter two misconceptions I rather expected to find: the beliefs that the United States has a preferred candidate in the March presidential race, and that the Taiwan Security Enhancement Act now being considered on Capitol Hill promises major security benefits for Taiwan.

I was pleased to hear virtually all my interlocutors indicate that they understood that America's commitment is to Taiwan's democratic process, not to the electoral fortunes of any particular candidate. Despite the apparent efforts of some persons to suggest otherwise, this is indeed an accurate picture of Washington's interest. The United States agrees with the people of Taiwan that the responsibility of selecting Taiwan's next president is too important for outsiders, well-intentioned or not, to have a voice in the decision.

Lastly, I was pleasantly surprised by the hard-headed, even sophisticated understanding of the U.S. political scene I encountered when my discussions turned to the so-called Taiwan Security Enhancement Act. Apparently most of Taiwan's security analysts realize that despite its cleverly-chosen name, this legislation does not necessarily meet Taiwan's most pressing security needs.

Indeed, the bill seems designed more to address American political agendas and to calm Taiwan's psychological insecurities than to remedy actual shortcomings in Taiwan's security posture. In truth, this legislation, rather than enhancing Taiwan's security, will almost certainly increase Taiwan's insecurities. Beijing will no doubt interpret its adoption by Congress as proof that the United States is abandoning the understandings that have governed U.S.-PRC-Taiwan relations for more than two decades, and conclude that the United States seeks to resurrect the military alliance that once linked Washington and Taipei.

China can then be counted upon to respond in its usual heavy-handed manner, and tensions in the Strait could once more spiral upward. My Taipei interlocutors seemed fully aware of this danger, and not fooled by the seemingly benign and even laudable intent of this legislation.

I return to Washington then both mildly worried and reassured. On balance, I cannot help but be cheered by what I saw and heard during my brief sojourn in Taiwan. If Taiwan gets the leadership its people so clearly deserve, I am convinced that it will continue to flourish, and that the U.S.-Taiwan relationship will remain as it is now – an anchor to windward in an ocean of mighty storms.

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