



Bush's Korea Policy Gravitates Toward China. Will Taiwan Policy Follow? by Robert Sutter

The Bush administration came into office with a clear policy toward East Asia that emphasized consolidating relations with key allies, like South Korea, and with longstanding friends, like Taiwan, in the face of threats posed by North Korea and China. Several important allies, notably Japan and Australia, have cooperated closely with the United States on regional affairs, Iraq, and the war on terrorism, and U.S. relations with and reliance on Tokyo and Canberra remain strong.

In the case of South Korea, however, a convergence of circumstances has prompted the Bush administration to greatly lower its expectations of Seoul, while relying much more on China to help manage the North Korean threat. Meanwhile, Taiwan's protracted domestic political struggle in the months leading to the contested presidential election has called into serious question the U.S. administration's previous approach to Taiwan. The U.S. government has greatly lowered its expectations of the Taiwan government, which in U.S. eyes often is seen increasingly as capable of unpredictable and provocative actions that could lead to conflict in the Taiwan Strait.

Taiwan's perceived unpredictability and unreliability seem certain to continue following the contested presidential election of March 2004, in the lead up to crucial legislative elections later in the year, and probably into the foreseeable future. In this context, to secure U.S. interest in peace and stability in the Strait, the Bush administration may have few good alternatives other than to gravitate to the path followed on Korean issues, seeking pragmatic U.S. arrangements with China in order to reduce the chances of conflict in this sensitive area.

Perhaps the most important changed circumstance from 2001 to 2004 is the U.S. strategic preoccupation with Iraq, Afghanistan, Southwest Asia, and the broader war on terrorism. U.S. policy can ill afford and seeks to avoid new conflicts in sensitive areas like Korea and the Taiwan Strait, while remaining firm against aggression by or perceived appeasement of adversaries.

Downgrading Seoul, relying on Beijing

The Bush administration has remained conflicted about dealing with North Korea, and U.S. policy drifted in 2001-2002 until North Korea brought matters to a head by breaking past agreements and overtly pursuing a nuclear weapons program. Preoccupied with the looming confrontation with Iraq and the broader war on terrorism, the Bush administration fell into a reactive stance in dealing with the North Korean crisis.

The U.S. approach was seriously complicated by strong anti-American sentiment in South Korea and policies of the South Korean government that diverged strongly from the Bush administration stance. Elected in December 2002 on an anti-U.S. platform, the new South Korean president, Roo Moo-hyun, subsequently shifted in the face of U.S. advice and other concerns to a somewhat more supportive stance regarding U.S. interests, but his administration was weak, conflicted, and provided a less than steady base for U.S. policy in dealing with the North. President Roh's impeachment in March 2004 is the latest development underlining the weakness and uncertainty of South Korea and its contribution to U.S. policy toward the North.

The U.S. still works closely with the South Korean military in deterring the North and formally coordinates U.S. policy with Seoul as well as Tokyo. But the fact of the matter is that U.S. policy in 2002-2004 has found greater common ground over North Korean issues with the Chinese government, which unlike South Korea has been stable and predictable, while it has been anxious to avoid instability in the region and to find ways to improve relations with the United States. Illustrating this point, U.S. officials with responsibility for East Asia affairs and dealing with North Korea lauded China's role in recent testimony before the U.S. Congress. These same officials in testimony to Congress in 2002 had shown great reserve in comments about China while giving clear pride of place to positive features of the U.S.-South Korean relationship.

Bush's Taiwan problem

The Bush administration had anticipated that a strong U.S. posture toward Beijing and strong U.S. support for Taiwan would deter China from taking aggressive action against Taiwan. Also, Taiwan was encouraged to work closely and cooperatively with the U.S. in taking careful and concrete steps to offset China's military buildup and other intimidation tactics.

Beijing appeared deterred though it has continued its military buildup and has opposed enhanced U.S. support for Taiwan. However, unlike Chinese practice in the previous decade, Chinese policy makers since mid-2001 have endeavored to avoid serious confrontation and conflict with the U.S. administration, leading to broadening of common ground between the two powers and a marked improvement in bilateral relations. Taiwan, for its part, has cooperated with U.S. military efforts that avoid major Taiwan expenditures, while Taiwan leaders have engaged in provocative rhetoric and political maneuvers regarding sensitive cross-Strait issues that have seriously complicated U.S. interest in preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.

Despite strong efforts by President Bush and his senior officials in recent months, the U.S. government was unable to

get Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian to back away from his determination to hold referendums on sensitive cross-Strait issues in March 2004 and to conduct a presidential campaign seemingly designed to provoke Beijing into a hostile response. There seems to be little likelihood that the Taiwan president will abandon his stated agenda to seek a new constitution and other political steps toward greater independence that are seen as serious challenges and possible causes of military action by Beijing. Indeed the imperative of the pan-green leader to take new steps to energize his political base in the highly charged and divided political atmosphere in Taiwan is likely to remain strong in the lead up to the crucial Legislative election at the end of this year and probably longer. Domestic Taiwan politics clearly trumped Taiwan concern over alienating the U.S. government in the lead-up to the presidential election in March 2004 and this seems likely to remain the case for the foreseeable future.

In the event the pan-blue leader were to be determined the winner of the contested March 2004 election, the problems for U.S. policy would not go away. The pan-green would keep up the political pressure, while the pan-blue's more accommodating posture toward the PRC means that U.S. efforts to encourage sober and rigorous defense preparedness in Taiwan would meet resistance from officials unwilling to spend the money on these expensive efforts.

How to avoid conflict in the Taiwan area – work with China?

A key problem for the U.S. under these circumstances is how to avoid conflict in the Taiwan Strait prompted most immediately by the continuing and perhaps worsening uncertainty in Taiwan. As in the case of recent U.S. policy with an unpredictable South Korea, Taiwan seems unreliable

and a big part of the problem. Of course, the U.S. can try to press Taiwan to adjust policy more in line with U.S. interests, but this seems unlikely to be successful. The U.S. may also be able to use military, economic, or other measures on its own that could stabilize the situation, but it is hard to see what unilateral U.S. measures would work well under current circumstances.

Meanwhile, a path that has been surprisingly satisfactory for the Bush administration in the case of Korea is to deal more directly and constructively with China. Beijing leaders also seem to have a need to work closely with the U.S. in order to avoid confrontation and conflict with the U.S. prompted by unpredictable developments in Taiwan. Such U.S.-PRC dealings need not go beyond established lines of communications nor involve more than initial steps to reassure one another that they will not resort to precipitous military action when cooperative U.S.-PRC steps can be pursued to ease tensions and manage Taiwan issues in ways that do not lead to war. As in the case of South Korea, Taiwan would obviously be marginalized in U.S. policy through this process, but the imperative of avoiding a new (and for the U.S. unnecessary) conflict at a time of major U.S. strategic preoccupation elsewhere could provide sufficient justification for this U.S. policy adjustment.

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