



## **Pro-Taiwan (But Not Anti-China)** by Randall Schriver

In 2003, while still serving as deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asia, I was asked by Taiwanese reporters what the U.S. view would be on the proposal for Taiwan to hold a national referendum in conjunction with the 2004 election. I gave a rather lengthy, rambling and convoluted answer that could have been summarized in a more concise form by saying, "it depends." The same remains true today.

Why does a referendum pose difficult questions for the U.S. government? Why are U.S. officials unwilling to simply endorse any referendum on any subject of Taiwan's choosing?

The core challenge faced by U.S. officials when such matters are considered comes from the tension that emanates from asking two questions: How can the U.S. be pro-Taiwan, but not anti-China? And how can the U.S. be pro-democracy, but not pro-independence?

Clearly the U.S. is a long-time supporter of Taiwan, sustains a great affinity for its people, and stands to benefit from investing further in the bilateral relationship. But the U.S. also needs good relations with China.

The U.S. has a strong interest in seeing Taiwan's democracy succeed and strengthen. Such an outcome not only supports a regional and global strategy to broaden the international community of democracies, it also best positions Taiwan to be a like-minded partner to the U.S. on a range of important issues such as counter-terrorism, trade liberalization, and maritime security. But the Bush administration, like the six preceding administrations, will not support Taiwanese independence.

It is important for government leaders in Taipei and people in Taiwan to understand that these are the questions that will inform policy discussions in Washington. It is the dynamic analysis surrounding these questions that leads Washington to conclude that the subject matter of a referendum in Taiwan is consequential, and the timing of public announcements related to a referendum matter as well.

Too often, frustrated people in Taiwan will interpret a U.S. policy statement as being animated by a desire to curry favor with Beijing. The truth of the matter is that U.S. policy decisions are often more complex than would be the case if the sole objective was to please China.

It is more accurate to acknowledge the balancing act – how to be pro-Taiwan, but not anti-China.

Returning to the question of a national referendum in Taiwan in this context, let's consider what U.S. officials are likely discussing as Taiwan conducts its own debate regarding the wisdom of holding a referendum next year.

As I stated in a variety of public forums in 2003, one can imagine categorizing referendums in Taiwan in three ways from the U.S. perspective.

Category one is a referendum on a topic that relates to good governance, increasing efficiency and resolving a contentious public debate that the legislature is unable to resolve (e.g., Taiwan should build a fourth nuclear power plant). A second-order benefit of a referendum in category one is that the collective experience resulting from conducting the referendum in and of itself would help further strengthen Taiwan's democracy.

Category two is a referendum that most clearly addresses the question of independence and/or sovereignty (e.g., an actual referendum on whether Taiwan should declare its independence).

And finally, category three would be a referendum that is highly symbolic in nature (has no consequential impact on governance and policy), and touches obliquely on questions of Taiwan's status or sovereignty.

From the U.S. perspective, a referendum in category one is quite easy to support despite pressure that might come from Beijing. In such a case, the U.S. could comfortably support a referendum in the spirit of being pro-Taiwan (but not anti-China), and being pro-democracy (without being pro-independence).

A referendum in category two is quite easy to oppose despite the deep desire among many in Taiwan to see such questions addressed in a direct fashion. The U.S. would oppose a referendum in category two on the grounds that it would be inconsistent with our non-support for independence.

It is category three that will spark the most internal debate in Washington and whose wording will become the Rorschach test for Asia policy experts in the U.S. trying to manage a set of competing interests. Ultimately, Washington would likely discourage this type of referendum as well because the cost-benefit analysis for the U.S. tilts in the negative direction.

Thus far, the proposal on the table in Taiwan rests firmly in category three. Holding a referendum on whether or not to seek membership in the UN under the name "Taiwan" will be problematic for Washington. It is a topic that seems highly symbolic (no matter the results of the vote, there is no chance Taiwan will be admitted to the UN under any name as long as China holds a veto) and certainly touches on Taiwan's status (by virtue of specifying the application should be made under the name "Taiwan").

There is also a chance that an attempt to hold a referendum on this topic could be a set-back for Taiwan's democracy rather than a step toward strengthening democracy

(there is a very real possibility that a referendum on such a topic could draw another boycott from the pan-blue camp). Two referendums in a row that draw under 50 percent participation would constitute a blow to efforts to deepen democratic culture.

So what should the U.S. do in response to the desire of many in Taiwan to hold a referendum next year? Rather than oppose Taiwan's efforts outright, officials in Washington should encourage Taiwan to take steps that will truly strengthen its democracy and improve the quality of governance.

More specifically, the U.S. can actively encourage Taiwan to employ the tool of a national referendum to address issues that will be consequential in improving the lives of the people in Taiwan, rather than a more symbolic issue such as UN membership.

The U.S. should also remind Beijing that Washington supports democracy in Taiwan, including support for democratic methods such as conducting referendums.

Even if Taiwan ultimately does pursue a referendum on seeking UN membership under the name "Taiwan," Washington should urge Beijing to show restraint (an expression of public sentiment is hardly a *casus belli*), and remind China that its overall posture toward Taiwan, which is characterized by missile deployments and pressure on Taipei's government, is doing more to drive Taiwanese away rather than attract them to better relations with China.

Finally, Washington should encourage leaders in Taiwan to consider its broader interests in bettering relations with the U.S. vs. whatever short-term gain might come from holding a symbolic referendum.

We can position ourselves for much more robust bilateral ties across the full spectrum of activities including trade, security, regional democracy promotion, global issues, and the like – but not if we are consumed with squabbling over the true intent behind a particular referendum.

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