



Cross-Strait Moderation and the United States – Policy Adjustments Needed by Robert Sutter

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U.S. policy supports President Ma Ying-jeou's efforts to ease tensions in the Taiwan Strait through moderation and accommodation. But the resulting change in cross-Strait power dynamics may also necessitate some reconsideration of U.S. policy viz-a-viz China and Taiwan. The Taiwan president's approach stands in welcome contrast to the cross-Strait policies of his predecessor, Chen Shui-bian. Chen was widely seen in Washington to have provoked China repeatedly as he raised cross-Strait tensions to sometimes dangerous levels through pro-independence initiatives.

As in Taiwan, attention in the U.S. focuses on progress in further easing tensions through Ma's policy of interchange with and reassurance of China. Rapidly developing China-Taiwan economic and social contacts are complemented by much slower progress regarding Taiwan's international profile and the military buildup China continues to direct at Taiwan.

U.S. policymakers and other interested observers are anxious to see if Beijing will reciprocate Taiwan's accommodation by allowing Taiwan to participate in activities related to the World Health Organization (WHO), and whether China will show some easing of its large military buildup opposite Taiwan through confidence building or other measures. The U.S. inclination to support the positive in Ma's reassurance policy toward China adds to an overall "positive and constructive" U.S. approach to China voiced during Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's recent trip to Asia that plays down U.S.-China differences in the interests of advancing cooperation on important economic, environmental, and regional issues.

The fading goal of "balance" in the Strait

The positive U.S. approach to China and U.S. support for Ma's strong efforts to reassure China have not directly addressed changing realities of power and influence regarding Taiwan. While support for Taiwan's outreach to China eases tensions and promotes stability, it also coincides with and sometimes indirectly reinforces ever-growing and deepening Chinese influence over Taiwan.

Economically, this trend of growing Chinese influence is seen in deepening Taiwan trade and investment commitment to China, culminating recently in the proposed Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement. Diplomatically, China's effectiveness in isolating Taiwan has reached a point where

Taiwan is directly seeking China's permission to gain the ability to interact with the WHO. Militarily, the cross-Strait balance continues to tip in the favor of China and its large buildup during many years of much less than rigorous defense spending and military preparations on Taiwan.

This growing imbalance raises a number of questions for U.S. policy.

Of immediate interest, does the growing imbalance make China more or less likely to be accommodating to Taiwan's requests for participation in activities related to the WHO in particular and participation in international affairs more broadly, and Taiwan's requests for concessions regarding easing Chinese military pressure to Taiwan? Given its ever-stronger influence, China may see little incentive to make sensitive concessions involved to meet Taiwan's requests unless Taiwan, presumably with U.S. support, works more effectively to show China that if it does not accommodate Taiwan on these issues, Taiwan will follow a different international and military path. For now at least, neither the U.S. nor Taiwan government shows much interest in demonstrating such resolve, preferring to emphasize the positive and reassure Beijing.

Cross-Strait power realities and trends also pose a broader challenge to the longstanding U.S. policy goal of maintaining a balance of power and influence in the Taiwan area favorable to Taiwan and U.S. interests and influenced by the United States. This goal was a centerpiece of U.S. policy in the Cold War. Even after the break in official relations, U.S. efforts to shore up Taiwan diplomatically, economically, and militarily in seeking appropriate balance in cross-Strait relations were seen in provisions of the Taiwan Relations Act in 1979, in U.S. efforts to preserve Taiwan's seat in the Asian Development Bank in the 1980s, in U.S. efforts to support Taiwan's representation in APEC in the 1990s, and in U.S. support for Taiwan's entry into the WTO in 2001. Most recently, Director of National Intelligence and former head of the Pacific Command Adm. Dennis Blair, reassured a congressional committee on Feb. 12 that the U.S. maintained a commitment to help Taiwan sustain a military balance in the face of China's buildup.

Consultations among policy experts in and out of U.S. government and recent developments suggest that the longstanding notion of U.S.-supported balance in the Taiwan Strait is no longer viable in the face of ever-increasing Chinese influence over Taiwan. Policy experts in the camp of presidential candidate John McCain and others argued for a robust buildup of U.S. support for Taiwan to counter what they viewed as adverse trends toward greater asymmetry between Taiwan and China. But this approach has been overshadowed by more pragmatic and immediate concerns in Washington and Taiwan regarding fostering positive relations

with China and avoiding disruptions in recent reassurance efforts regarding Taiwan.

Some officials and policy specialists in Washington and Taipei privately say that recent easing of tensions and cross-Strait trends work well for longer-term U.S. interests regarding Taiwan. They assert that support for those trends should supersede traditional U.S. concern with sustaining balance. That case has not yet been made effectively by the U.S. government. The argument also is not well understood by many congressional officials as well as media and other representatives with an interest in U.S. policy toward Taiwan who still see U.S. interests based on seeking appropriate balance that is influenced by the United States.

Against this background, it appears that needed adjustments in U.S. policy include:

- A review of U.S. policy options that takes account of the full implications of China's markedly increased influence over Taiwan along with the perceived benefits of reassuring Beijing in the interests of cross-Strait stability.
- If, as seems likely under prevailing trends, this review determines to put aside or seriously modify the longstanding U.S. emphasis on sustaining a balance of influence in the Taiwan area favorable to and heavily influenced by the United States, U.S. policymakers need to consult closely with, educate, and persuade congressional, media, and other representatives with a stake in U.S. Taiwan relations on the benefits of the new approach.
- Specific questions to be considered in the policy review include:
 1. Would U.S. efforts to shore up support for Taiwan militarily, diplomatically and/or economically be more or less likely to prompt Beijing to ease diplomatic and military pressure against Taiwan? And would they be welcomed by a Ma administration focused on reassuring China in cross-Strait relations?
 2. Would modification of past U.S. emphasis on balance in the Taiwan Strait and recognition of China's growing influence in the Taiwan area affect broader U.S. strategic plans to work with Asia-Pacific allies, notably Japan, and other regional partners in constructing contingency plans to hedge against the possibility that rising China may become aggressive or disrupt the regional order?
 3. Does greater U.S. acceptance of China's powerful influence over Taiwan open the way to policy options of U.S. mediation and closer interchange with China over the future of Taiwan which have been eschewed by U.S. policymakers since the negative experiences of Patrick Hurley and George Marshall in the 1940s. Pacific Commander Adm. Timothy Keating on Feb. 18 offered to host meetings between Taiwan and Chinese military officials in order to ease cross-Strait tensions. While seeming sensible in the current situation, the offer also appeared to contradict longstanding U.S. assurance to Taiwan that the U.S. would not mediate between Taiwan and China.