

**“Cross-Strait Moderation and the United States” – A Response to Robert Sutter**

by Richard Bush and Alan D. Romberg

*Richard Bush ([rbush@brookings.edu](mailto:rbush@brookings.edu)) is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and director of its Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies. Alan Romberg ([aromberg@earthlink.net](mailto:aromberg@earthlink.net)) is a distinguished fellow at the Henry L. Stimson Center.*

In his recent article, “Cross-Strait Moderation and the United States – Policy Adjustment Needed” (*PacNet* #17, March 5, 2009) Robert Sutter has made the useful observation that changes occurring between the PRC and Taiwan may have significant implications for United States interests. Therefore, he argues, those changes must be clearly understood, not only by policy-makers but also the public, and, if necessary, Washington should study and take compensatory steps.

There is no question that significant change is occurring in cross-Strait relations, as part of the larger story of China’s return to great-power status. But we have a somewhat different perspective on what is going on and what the U.S. should do about it.

First, the goal of the United States regarding the Taiwan Strait for over 50 years has not been, as Sutter asserts, “maintaining a balance of power and influence in the Taiwan area favorable to Taiwan and U.S. interests.” The goal since the mid-1950s has been the maintenance of peace and stability in the Strait, including through the peaceful resolution of issues between Beijing and Taipei. Maintaining a balance of power and influence has been a means to that end, and not a trivial one. But it is not the only way that Washington has pursued its underlying goal. Diplomacy is another means. Fostering a good relationship with Beijing has been another. Encouraging cross-Strait cooperation is yet another. The point here is that we should not confuse means and ends.

U.S. actions during the Chen Shui-bian administration demonstrated this approach at work. Of course, China’s growing military power provided a context, but the key challenge was the danger that the deepening antagonism between Chen and Beijing could, through miscalculation, result in a conflict that would involve the United States. Such an outcome would have been fundamentally at odds with our goal of promoting peace and preventing war and highly damaging to U.S. strategic national interests. The Bush administration then used diplomacy to reduce the chance of conflict.

President Ma’s initiatives toward Beijing since he took office almost a year ago, and Beijing’s positive response, have been a boon to U.S. interests because they can reduce the mutual fear that has poisoned cross-Strait relations for the last

15 years. Sutter may be correct that the U.S. executive branch has not yet made the case why recent developments are salutary, but that is a fixable problem. Moreover, although Washington has endorsed the improvements in cross-Strait relations, it will also improve its own relations with Taiwan, including in the security realm.

Sutter’s focus on a power-and-influence balance shifting in Beijing’s direction may obscure as much as it reveals. To be sure, China’s capabilities are growing and its neighbors throughout East Asia must address that trend. But the mere creation of capabilities does not mean that they will or can be used – nor that efforts to do so would be unopposed. Sutter’s call for a review of policy grows out of the assumption that the U.S. would not be willing to take an effective stand against PRC coercion or worse against Taiwan. We find little reason to make that assumption. Hence, Sutter’s concern about reaction in Japan strikes us as misplaced, as is his call for consideration of a U.S. mediating role, which he raises on the assumption that there is now “greater U.S. acceptance of China’s powerful influence over Taiwan.”

Moreover, while “demonstrating resolve” to respond to China’s growing capability may be necessary in some cases, it will not be in others.

There is in Sutter’s analysis a lurking fear that the mainland’s power will lead to PRC intimidation and Taiwan submission. We cannot rule out that the people of Taiwan will someday decide that unification on terms dictated by Beijing is an acceptable outcome. But the odds of that are not high because Taiwan has resources that will encourage PRC restraint. As with the U.S., the Chinese accumulation of power is a means to an end. That end is the resolution of the dispute that has divided the two sides of the Strait for 60 years, and a heavy-handed exercise of PRC power is likely to be counter-productive. Contrary to Sutter’s apparent assumption that such a coercive course will appeal to Beijing, in fact the undesirability of trying that approach in terms of achieving its objectives is widely recognized on the mainland.

The first and foremost resource at Taiwan’s disposal is its democratic system. Ma Ying-jeou won power in important measure through the appeal that reassurance of and expanded cooperation with China would better guarantee the island’s prosperity, international dignity, and security. It remains an open question whether Beijing will be willing to make the sort of concessions that prove Ma’s case with respect to dignity and security. That is its choice, and Sutter is skeptical that Beijing will comply, unless Taiwan threatens to take “a different international and military path.” (It is also an open question whether expanding cross-Strait economic ties will bolster the island’s prosperity amid a global economic crisis).

What is not open to question is that Taiwan voters have the clear option of punishing Ma and the KMT if his promise

is not realized or if they believe that Beijing's terms, rather than meeting their aspirations, create political, security and economic vulnerabilities. While Beijing should not fear the give-and-take of a robust democratic system in Taiwan, what it *should* fear is that its failure to cooperate with Ma on these issues will bring back to power a Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) that is potentially in a "fundamentalist" mode that some in the party still favor and that would carry with it the potential for a replay of 2002-2008. It is the possibility of that outcome that is the most powerful instrument to encourage PRC moderation and flexibility.

There is another way that Taiwan's democracy will discourage preemptive capitulation. That is, for some sort of unification to occur, it must have the very broad consent of the Taiwan public. A change in the legal status of the Taipei government, which unification under any terms would entail, will require amendments to the ROC Constitution, which in turn requires a three-fourths vote in the Legislative Yuan and a super-majority in a referendum. Although the DPP was defeated in the last elections, it still commands significant support – at this point, more than enough support to block any constitutional change. China will have to be more creative than it has been so far if it wishes to foster a broad consensus on the island for continuing improvement in cross-Strait relations and, eventually, some sort of unification.

Taiwan can also fortify its position by strengthening the fundamental pillars of its security. These include an internationally competitive economy with strong multinational corporations; an effective, two-party political system; a modest military deterrent; sensible diplomacy; and a strong relationship with the U.S. These are not easy tasks but they are not impossible. Accomplishing them will help ensure that Taiwan is not without power of its own.

The PRC does have a stronger economy and a stronger military. But those do not guarantee that Beijing will achieve its Taiwan goal, and certainly not that it will be able to do so through intimidation and coercion. The power it still lacks is the political appeal to the Taiwan public. Reassurance of the mainland has its risks, but it also has the advantage of reducing the probability of war, and of laying a foundation for a cross-Strait relationship on terms acceptable to both sides, which is the goal not just of the United States but Taiwan and the PRC as well.