



Why Taiwan's Freedom of Action Continues to Erode

by Robert Sutter

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Cross-strait relations continue to improve because this trend is perceived as being in the interests of the three main actors: the governments of China, Taiwan, and the United States. In the Taiwan presidential election campaign, incumbent Ma Ying-jeou sees increased engagement as in Taiwan's interests. A victory by the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) could lead to frictions with China, though the DPP is showing flexibility as it appeals to centrist Taiwan voters.

Advances in cross-strait relations and Taiwan election publicity overshadow three sets of factors that ultimately determine Taiwan's future: (1) China's ever-growing economic, military, and international leverage over Taiwan appears obvious. (2) Indigenous Taiwan weakness and (3) eroding US support receive little systematic treatment. An assessment of these determinants shows that those many observers in Taiwan and abroad who believe Taiwan has preserved its freedom of action amid a vaguely defined "status quo" are mistaken. The three sets of factors show that Taiwan has gravitated to China's orbit, making a decision to reverse recent engagement with China unrealistic.

China's Strengths, Taiwan's Weaknesses

The military balance in the Taiwan Strait intimidates Taiwan and limits its freedom of action. China's impressive hardware targeting Taiwan grows in size and capability every year, while Taiwan falls further behind in meeting even basic goals of sustaining a level of defense spending equivalent to 3 percent of GDP. Arms sales from the United States reportedly are being delayed because of Taiwan defense budget shortfalls. The ability of the US to intervene militarily in Taiwan contingencies remains strong, but the reluctance of US leaders to do so grows, in part because China develops capabilities increasing significantly the cost of US intervention.

Not long ago, Taiwan's vibrant economy was seen as comparable in international importance to China's. In 1995, Taiwan's economy was worth more than one-third the value of China's. Today, the Chinese economy is 15 times larger than Taiwan's. Moreover, Taiwan's economic dependence on China is unsurpassed. Over 1 million Taiwan citizens are in China, mainly to conduct business.

Internationally, Taiwan recognizes that advances for Taiwan in world affairs now require Beijing's permission or acquiescence, even on issues as uncontroversial as trade.

Eroding US Support

The decline of US support for Taiwan receives little attention and so is discussed at greater length here. Close examination shows that public support given by the Barack Obama government for Ma's cross-strait policies fails to hide the reduced overall US backing for Taiwan, especially for actions that risk complicating US-China relations for the sake of shoring up support for Taiwan.

US policy today deters China's use of force against Taiwan, on the one hand, while sustaining conditions for a peaceful resolution of the China-Taiwan impasse, on the other. This line of thinking in US policy has existed since the normalization of relations with China and the breaking of official ties with Taiwan in the 1970s. Some of its advocates, notably Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski, placed less emphasis on deterring China and more emphasis on fostering conditions for a settlement of the Taiwan issue. At the time of the Taiwan Relations Act, passed in 1979, the line of thinking on Taiwan favored by US leaders like Kissinger and Brzezinski was accompanied and often challenged by three other important segments of US elite and popular opinion that supported Taiwan for other reasons:

- (1) A bipartisan group of leaders in Congress made clear that their support for Taiwan involved deterring China's use of force, while buying time—a long time—for conditions to develop in ways advantageous to Taiwan. In this way, they sought to ensure that any settlement of the impasse would be more favorable to Taiwan than one carried out under existing circumstances, which they viewed as putting the island at a distinct disadvantage.
- (2) Others in Congress and the US government—in particular, the Reagan administration—believed that strong US support for Taiwan buttressed Washington's ability to create a strategic environment in the Asia-Pacific where China would be compelled to cooperate more closely with the United States and accommodate the status quo in the Taiwan Strait. They were interested in using US relations with Taiwan as a means to shape the trajectory of China's rising influence in the region and world affairs.
- (3) Some conservative congressional members and opinion leaders opposed the break in relations with Taiwan for the sake of establishing relations with China on the grounds that the Communist administration on the mainland could not be trusted.

In short, the strengthening of US relations with Taiwan at the time of the Taiwan Relations Act and in subsequent years owed a lot to the work of congressional and administration officials, and various nongovernment advocates, who were not focused on sustaining conditions for a settlement of the Taiwan-China impasse. The congressional advocates appeared personally committed to their positions and were prepared to bear the consequences of opposing moves they viewed as abandoning Taiwan and pushing it into a resolution with China.

Congressional as well as media support for Taiwan rose as it became a democracy while China killed dissidents in Tiananmen Square and the demise of the Soviet bloc undercut the main rationale for US support for China. Congress was almost uniform in pressing President Clinton to grant Taiwan president Lee Teng-hui a visa in 1995. However, unlike in the case of the Taiwan Relations Act, congressional support proved fickle and thin as the earlier backers of Taiwan fell silent when China reacted with threatening military exercises. The Clinton administration eventually saw the Chinese moves as so serious that it sent two aircraft carrier battle groups to the region to deter China. For the rest of Clinton's tenure, congressional Republicans vocally supported Taiwan and attacked Clinton's efforts to reassure China over Taiwan. However, these efforts seemed driven more by expedient and partisan reasons focused on discrediting the president than by any steadfast commitment to Taiwan.

The George W. Bush administration entered office with strong determination to shore up US support for Taiwan as part of a broader effort to strengthen US alliances and friendships in the Asia-Pacific in order to influence Chinese policies and practices in directions favored by the United States. This effort collapsed as Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian exploited US support by seeking pro-independence initiatives that provoked strong political and military reaction by China. US contacts with Chen were cut back sharply, and differences between the two administrations came into public view. Few in Congress were willing to travel to Taiwan, voice support for its leader and his policies, or take steps to counter Bush administration pressure on Chen to curb provocations of China.

Contrasting the Obama government's approach to Taiwan with the early George W. Bush administration's or with earlier highpoints of US support for Taiwan suggests how far US support has eroded. Administration officials today seem firm in efforts to deter China's use of force, but the changing military balance in the Taiwan Strait underscores Washington's reluctance to face a Taiwan contingency. US support for Ma's rapprochement with China is seen positively as sustaining conditions for an eventual peaceful resolution.

Little is heard from those Americans who advocated strengthening Taiwan's position vis-à-vis China to buy time for Taipei to wait for better conditions for negotiations. The anti-communist sentiment that drove congressional and other leaders to support Taiwan in the past seems negligible. In contrast to the early Bush years, the current government has not emphasized Taiwan playing a role in ongoing US efforts to shore up a strategic environment in the Asia-Pacific that would compel China to behave in ways compatible with US interests.

The Obama administration's broad and multifaceted diplomatic, security, and other initiatives in the region collectively appear to represent the most important shift in regional dynamics in several years. Although Washington has increased its engagement across the Asia-Pacific—ranging from India to the Pacific Islands—the major speeches and pronouncements on re-engagement do not discuss any upgrading of relations with Taiwan. The Taiwan government reciprocates and appears to reinforce this US posture. In contrast with the public support of the governments of South Korea, Japan, ASEAN, India, and other Asia-Pacific countries for the Obama administration's greater regional activism, Taiwan has maintained a low public profile.

Republican control of the House of Representatives may revive partisan reasons for some congressional members to support Taiwan, but the fact remains that few members visit the island and those that do sometimes come away with views adverse to Taiwan's interests. The fracturing of the Taiwan lobby in Washington has resulted in confusion and a decline in Taiwan's influence.

Implications

Greater realism about Taiwan's future and its inability to turn back from the path of ongoing engagement with China will help to prepare elite, media, and public opinion in Taiwan, the United States, and other nations concerned with the situation in Taiwan to deal with the consequences of its continued trajectory into China's orbit. In particular, elites and others in Taiwan and the United States, including those opposed to Taiwan losing control of its destiny, may recognize more clearly that by following broadly supported recent policy choices made by the Taiwan administration and supported by China and the United States they are complicit in a continuing process enabling greater Chinese influence over Taiwan's future options.

Of Taiwan's neighbors, Japan probably will be most concerned about Taiwan's continued path toward China. The United States may need to work harder to reassure wary Japanese, as well as other US allies and associates, of the US resolve and ability to hedge against a rising China as Taipei pursues closer rapprochement with Beijing. Another consequence of Taiwan's recent direction is that the United States matters much less to Taiwan. Reduced competition and closer cooperation between Taiwan and China reduces the island's need for a US counterweight.

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