

Wild Card: A Democratic Taiwan

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The conventional wisdom in American foreign policy and media circles is that the smashing victory by the Kuomintang Party (KMT) in the January 2008 elections for Taiwan's national legislature will mean a dramatic easing of tensions between Taiwan and the People's Republic of China (PRC).¹ As is often the case, the conventional wisdom is, at best, only partially correct. True, the KMT's rout of President Chen Shui-bian's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) was an emphatic repudiation of Chen's performance in office. But whether the voting result was a rejection of his assertive policies toward Beijing is less certain. Taiwan's subpar economic performance during Chen's eight years as president, combined with a cascade of ethical and financial scandals that implicated even the president's immediate family, seemed to antagonize voters more than did his cross-Strait policies. That is not surprising. In most countries, legislative

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elections tend to turn on economic and character issues more than diplomatic or even national security issues.

Elections for the executive branch are another matter. There, security concerns typically play a larger role. In Taiwan's case, it remains to be seen whether the KMT's legislative landslide (winning more than two-thirds of the seats) will translate into victory in the March presidential election. KMT nominee Ma Ying-jeou is well ahead in the polls and probably will defeat DPP nominee Frank Hsieh, but an upset is possible.

If Ma wins the presidency, there will indeed be a serious effort on his part to dampen tensions with Beijing. In particular, Ma is almost certain to avoid the abrasive policies that became a staple of Chen's administration. We are not likely to see a continuation of the campaign to apply for membership in the United Nations under the name Taiwan rather than the Republic of China. One can anticipate Taipei's endorsement of direct air and sea links between Taiwan and the Mainland. A Ma administration may even reverse Chen's action in changing the names of state-owned corporations from "China" to "Taiwan." And there will be an end to the campaign to purge Taiwan's educational system of its Chinese heritage. Perhaps most important, the strident rhetoric about Taiwan's ultimate goal being permanent political separation from the Mainland will come to an end. All of those policy changes should bring a sense of relief in Beijing – and in Washington.

In the long run, though, even a KMT-dominated government is not likely to mean a decisive difference in resolving the island's ambiguous political status and the international tensions that it causes. Indeed, both Beijing and Washington must learn to deal with a vibrant, democratic Taiwan that has a growing sense of a separate national identity. Officials in both capitals have been slow to grasp the implications of the democratic transition that has taken place in Taiwan since the early 1990s. The underlying reality is that a KMT victory may postpone a crisis over Taiwan's status, but even an era of prolonged KMT political dominance probably will not avert it.

High Expectations

Both Beijing and Washington tend to misread – and underestimate – the significance of having to deal with a democratic Taiwan. Beijing is especially likely to experience frustration and disappointment in the coming years. Ever since Chen was elected president of Taiwan in 2000, the PRC's strategy has been to wait for a more moderate successor. China's leaders hoped that Chen would be defeated for re-election in 2004, but when that did not happen, they still maintained their strategy. The prevailing assumption in Beijing seems to be that its troubles with Taiwan are entirely the result of separatist agitation by Chen and his followers. Under a KMT administration, so the logic goes, independence sentiment in Taiwan will fade and prospects for the island's reunification with the Mainland will improve.

That assumption strengthened in the spring of 2005 when then-KMT leader Lien Chan visited the Mainland and made a variety of conciliatory statements. Chinese leaders feted Lien as a reward for comments that affirmed that the goal of the KMT was eventual reunification. Lien's successor, Ma, subsequently made similar pro-reunification comments.

If they examine Ma's position carefully, however, Chinese leaders may be in for profound disillusionment. Although Ma does endorse eventual reunification, he also emphasizes that the KMT is committed to preserving the status quo (i.e. de facto independence) "for the foreseeable future."² There are also three very important caveats attached to the goal of reunification. First, Ma has made it clear that reunification can take place only if mainland China evolves into a prosperous, liberal democracy. As he put it in a February 2006 speech, reunification becomes possible once "developments in mainland China reach a stage when its political democracy, economic prosperity, and social well-being become *congruent* with those of Taiwan."³ Ma – and most KMT members – have no interest in having Taiwan unify with China in its current, authoritarian incarnation. Second, reunification could only take place with the explicit endorsement of the Taiwanese people. In other words, Taiwan would have a veto. Again, Ma is categorical on that point: "Since Taiwan has become a full-fledged democracy,

reunification with mainland China cannot proceed without the consent of the Taiwanese people.”⁴ Finally, the KMT has reluctantly conceded that all options – even independence – must be available to Taiwanese voters when it comes time to make a decision.

Those caveats are anathema to Beijing. The PRC’s political elite have no intention of giving up the Communist Party’s monopoly of power and transforming China into a Western-style democracy. Chinese leaders have also emphasized repeatedly that Taiwanese voters cannot have a veto over whether reunification takes place. And Taiwanese independence is an option that Beijing considers utterly illegitimate, even if that is what the island’s population might desire.

The reality is that there is less of a substantive difference between Ma’s positions and the policies that Chen’s government has pursued than it might appear on the surface. The KMT is just more subtle and conciliatory in its language, and would be more cautious about actions that might provoke Beijing. In the short run, the latter is quite important. Whereas Chen and the DPP have repeatedly pushed the envelope on asserting Taiwan’s sovereignty, and thereby threatened to disrupt the fragile status quo in the Taiwan Strait (much to Washington’s dismay), a KMT presidency is committed to preserving the status quo. In the long run, though, reunification would not be significantly more likely under a KMT administration than a DPP one. And it remains to be seen how long Beijing will be content with a status quo that maintains Taiwan’s existence as a *de facto* independent state.

The KMT’s equivocation about reunification is not surprising given the attitude of the Taiwanese people. A March 2007 survey by a major research institute in Taiwan showed that a majority of respondents rejected the notion that the island must eventually reunify with China, and an overwhelming majority believed that Taiwan’s political future should be determined solely by the Taiwanese people.⁵ Since the KMT wants to prosper politically, it cannot ignore those sentiments. If the party ever agreed to Beijing’s formula of “one country, two systems” (essentially an enhanced version of the Hong Kong model), it risks being soundly repudiated by the Taiwanese public.

At the very least, there is widespread insistence that Taiwan be treated as a sovereign, equal party in negotiations with Beijing. For a KMT government to enter into substantive talks regarding even long-term reunification, the PRC would have to offer greater autonomy than it has with the “one country, two systems” proposal. It remains to be seen whether Chinese leaders are willing to do that in response to a KMT government, both to reduce cross-Strait tensions and to minimize the likelihood of a DPP comeback.

But serious negotiations for ultimate reunification on the basis of the one country, two systems model are what Beijing expects from a KMT administration. One wonders what will happen if those hopes fail to materialize. Until now, Beijing has insisted that the “Taiwan problem” is because of Chen and the DPP, and that most Taiwanese do not support the “splittists”. But the PRC’s hostility to manifestations of democracy in Taiwan suggests that Chinese leaders suspect differently. Chen’s strategy of holding referenda on diplomatic and security is-

Taiwanese attitudes limit the leverage Washington can hope to exercise over Taipei’s behavior.

issues (most recently on seeking membership in the United Nations under the name Taiwan) especially infuriates the Mainland. Not only does Chen’s approach highlight Taiwan’s increasingly democratic political

features (which an authoritarian regime trying to keep a restless population on the Mainland in line and deal with rambunctious democrats in Hong Kong regards as inherently threatening), but Chinese leaders believe that such referenda may set precedents for even more assertive referenda topics in the coming years.

At some point, the PRC regime will have to acknowledge that it has a problem with the views of a majority of the Taiwanese people, not just a small band of pro-independence agitators. Ironically, a period of KMT political preeminence might ultimately deepen tensions in the Taiwan Strait by making that reality undeniable.

Sentiment in Taiwan regarding the U.N. referendum issue illustrates the degree of support for Taiwanese sovereignty. A public opinion survey commissioned by the Mainland Affairs Council in September 2006, revealed that 75.8

percent of respondents favored continuing to seek a seat in the United Nations. Perhaps even more significant, 70.5 percent favored seeking that seat under the name Taiwan.⁶ A similar survey conducted in September 2007 found that 73.4 percent advocated applying for the U.N. seat under the name Taiwan.⁷

The 2007 poll again underscored the lack of support for reunification with the Mainland. Only a paltry 2.8 percent favored “unification as soon as possible,” and a mere 12.2 percent advocated “maintaining the status quo with unification later.” Conversely, 10.3 percent favored “independence as soon as possible,” and 16.5 percent “maintaining the status quo with independence later.” The largest faction, 34.9 percent, advocated “maintaining the status quo and deciding on independence or unification later,” and another 17.9 percent supported “maintaining the status quo indefinitely.” Since the status quo means continued *de facto* independence for Taiwan, those results can hardly be a comfort to PRC leaders. Finally, 67.8 percent explicitly rejected Beijing’s formula of “one country, two systems,” while only 14.8 percent endorsed it.⁸

The Bush Administration Confronts Taiwan

The evolution of a vibrant democratic system has posed challenges and frustrations for U.S. as well as Chinese officials. That is reflected in the mounting tensions between Taipei and Washington in recent years. The administration of George W. Bush initially adopted a policy of strong support for Taiwan, but that gradually waned as Chen’s government frequently blind-sided the United States with measures that antagonized Beijing – and produced pressure from Beijing on Washington to leash its obstreperous Taiwanese client. Since Washington needs China’s assistance on a variety of crucial international issues, most notably the North Korean and Iranian nuclear crises, U.S. leaders grew increasingly miffed at Taiwan for stirring up tensions.⁹ By 2007, Bush administration officials were directing increasingly pointed criticisms at Taipei.¹⁰ Chen’s effort to hold a national referendum endorsing the campaign to join the United Nations under the name Taiwan has especially stoked the administration’s annoyance. U.S. irritation on that issue culminated in an unusually blunt statement by Secretary of

State Condoleezza Rice in December 2007 that the proposed referendum was “a provocative policy” that “unnecessarily” raised tensions in the Taiwan Strait.¹¹

When Taiwan was governed by the authoritarian regimes of Chiang Kai-shek and his son Chiang Ching-kuo, Washington could usually count on a cooperative attitude from Taipei whenever U.S. officials made the American position clear and emphatic. The Bush administration discovered that with a democratic Taiwan, that assumption was no longer valid. As the United States has criticized Taiwanese policies that it regards as excessively disruptive of the status quo, it is often met with defiance and denunciation.¹² When U.S. officials openly opposed the proposed referendum on U.N. membership, Chen Shui-bian retorted that holding such a referendum was “basic democracy” in action, and that it would go forward as scheduled.¹³ The DPP chairman stated bluntly: “No matter what international pressure it faces, the DPP will stand by the Taiwanese people. We will carry out the referendum on entering the U.N.”¹⁴ Hsieh argued that the government should not be swayed on the issue, even if President Bush himself spoke out against Taipei’s course.¹⁵

As the U.S. pressure continued, Chen accused Washington of constantly “changing the rules,” and tightening its definition of acceptable Taiwanese conduct in an effort to placate Beijing. He also expressed bafflement and disappointment that the U.S. government supported independence for such upstart entities as Kosovo while berating Taiwan for exercising the prerogatives of sovereignty and democracy.¹⁶ On another occasion, he mused that some of the restrictions U.S. officials wanted to place on Taipei’s conduct could lead the Taiwanese to “think this is tantamount to locking up democracy in a bird cage.” That, he made clear, was simply unacceptable.¹⁷

Chen’s reaction to U.S. pressure and criticism was mild, however, compared to the response of more strident advocates of independence. The pro-DPP *Taipei Times* published a blistering editorial with the title “No Friend of Democracy in the U.S.” It was “deplorable”, the *Times* editorial stated, that the United States would “turn to humiliating practices to force Taiwanese officials into a direction that is not in the best interest of the people they were elected to represent.”¹⁸

When Raymond Burghardt, chairman of the American Institute in Taiwan (Washington's de facto embassy in Taipei) complained that the U.N. referendum might "harm the new president's ability to get off on the right foot" regarding cross-Strait relations, the *Times* responded harshly, asserting that Burghardt did not have "license to lecture Chen on what he should and should not do, nor draw red lines for the next president on how he should proceed on cross-Strait policy."¹⁹

The Taiwanese people likewise seem to resent U.S. pressure – or at least have not been willing to alter their views because of it. Another Mainland Affairs Council poll taken in December 2007 explicitly asked respondents whether they "disapproved of the proposed referendum because the U.S. is against it?" A decisive majority, 77.8 percent responded "no," while only 14.2 percent indicated that U.S. opposition influenced their views.²⁰ Chen's administration was a little more responsive, understanding that it was unwise for Taiwan to unduly antagonize its military protector. Nevertheless, while his government occasionally sought to soothe Washington – for example by reassuring U.S. officials that the U.N. referendum was not intended to set the stage for even more provocative measures – it was not willing to bend to U.S. pressure on the issue of the referendum itself.²¹

Yet even as Taiwanese officials and opinion leaders reject U.S. pressure, many of them exude confidence that Washington would still come to the island's rescue in the event of a crisis. There do appear to be some modest differences in perspective between DPP and KMT-oriented individuals on that point. In Taiwan in 2005, DPP partisans seemed virtually certain that the United States would intervene with military force in response to a PRC attack, even if Taipei arguably ignited a crisis by taking bold actions on independence. Their assumption was that no U.S. government could allow a fellow democracy, major trading partner, and long-time strategic ally to be conquered by a dictatorship. KMT types were somewhat more uneasy. They expressed confidence that the United States would protect Taiwan from an unprovoked PRC attack, but they worried that Taiwan might forfeit such protection if Taipei needlessly provoked a crisis. When pressed, though, most of them believed the United States would not aban-

don Taiwan, even under those circumstances.²² Such attitudes significantly limit the amount of leverage Washington can hope to exercise over Taipei's behavior.

Although Taiwanese officials are usually shrewd enough not to boast publicly about their certainty concerning America's commitment to democratic Taiwan, the sentiment does emerge from time to time. For example, a letter in the *Wall Street Journal* from the director of the press division in the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in Washington noted that the "stability and security" that Washington brings to the region by "its steadfast support for freedom sends a message to not only those in Beijing who would forcefully annex Taiwan, but to others who question America's resolve to stand up for democracy overseas."²³

U.S. Support Unwavering?

To complicate Washington's policy problems further, as Taiwan has evolved from an authoritarian system into a democracy, its emotional and ideological support in the United States has also expanded. That is especially true among conservative Republicans, but it also is present among the democracy and human rights lobby in the Democratic Party. There are now 167 members in the Taiwan Caucus – the core of pro-Taiwanese sentiment in the U.S. House of Representatives – more than one-third of the chamber's membership. The extent of such support complicates the efforts of any U.S. administration to take a strong stance against policies that Taipei might adopt.

To pro-Taiwan elements, tensions between Taiwan and the PRC involve a case of an aggressive, authoritarian regime wanting to snuff out of existence a peaceful, democratic country. Two neoconservative scholars, Dan Blumenthal of the American Enterprise Institute and Randy Scheunemann of the Project for a New American Century, express the sentiments of many opinion shapers who strongly back Taiwan. "In his historic [second] inauguration speech . . . President Bush made clear that the expansion of democracy and freedom are the central tenets of his foreign policy. On Taiwan policy, the administration should put those inspirational words into action by protecting a democracy from the aggressive

designs of a dictatorship.”²⁴

The Bush administration’s efforts to restrain the DPP government’s penchant for initiatives that Beijing regards as provocative draw intense fire from Taiwan’s friends in Congress. A typical episode came in December 2003. With PRC Premier Wen Jiabao at his side, President Bush stated that the United States opposed “any unilateral action by either China or Taiwan to change the status quo.” Making it clear that his warning was directed primarily to Taipei rather than Beijing, he added that “the comments and actions made by the leader of Taiwan indicate that he may be willing to make decisions unilaterally, to change the status quo, which we oppose.” The president went even further, standing mute as Wen characterized U.S. policy as one of “opposition to Taiwan independence.”²⁵

U.S. policy on Taiwan is based on the assumption that Taipei follows America’s policy lead.

Bush’s public undercutting of Taiwan drew immediate and sharp rebukes from the president’s political allies. Neoconservative luminaries William Kristol, Robert Kagan and Gary Schmitt immediately issued a statement criticizing the president for rewarding “Beijing’s bullying” but saying “not a word” about China’s missile buildup across the Taiwan Strait and the PRC’s repeated threats against Taiwan. They added that “appeasement of a dictatorship simply invites further attempts at intimidation.”²⁶ John Tkacik, an analyst at the Heritage Foundation’s Asian Studies Center, was even more caustic. Accusing the president of “losing his bearings” on the Taiwan issue, Tkacik did not attempt to conceal his dismay. “It just boggles the mind,” he said. “I’m just appalled. Clinton never would have gone this far.”²⁷

The president’s political allies were not the only people who believed that Bush went much too far in placating Beijing. The *Washington Post* weighed in with a scathing editorial criticizing Bush for essentially placing the United States “on the side of the dictators who promise war, rather than the democrats whose threat is a ballot box.” Such action begged the question “how malleable is his commitment to the defense of freedom as a guiding principle of U.S. policy.”²⁸

A similar reaction occurred in October 2004, when Secretary of State Colin Powell made comments during a trip to East Asia that seemed to tilt toward Beijing's position on the issue of reunification. The Bush administration's conservative supporters reacted with at least as much fury as they had to the president's December 2003 statement. Tkacik exemplified the criticism. "It is unsettling for the United States to be seen siding with an arrogant, belligerent, and aggressive Communist dictatorship against any democracy." He went even further, stating that "...Taiwan isn't just any democracy: It has been one of America's staunchest allies – despite the 1979 break in formal diplomatic relations." Yet, Tkacik charged, Secretary Powell had been persuaded "that democratic Taiwan's interests can be sacrificed to the warlike threats of Communist China."²⁹

Thomas Donnelly, an ultra-hawkish analyst at the American Enterprise Institute, was even more disgusted than Tkacik at the drift in U.S. policy on the Taiwan issue. Donnelly charged that "the plucky democrats of Taipei have been reviled by President Bush and his lieutenants as independence-obsessed trouble-makers." He was especially upset at the "weak response by the State Department" to the implied threats toward Taiwan in Beijing's anti-secession law.³⁰

More recently, when the State Department continued its campaign against Taipei's decision to hold a referendum proposing to pursue U.N. membership under the name Taiwan rather than the Republic of China, Representatives Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA) and Tom Tancredo (R-CO) sent a blistering letter to Condoleezza Rice in December 2007. Describing the repeated U.S. expressions of opposition to the referendum as "unseemly", the two congressmen criticized the State Department for interfering in Taiwan's internal politics "while parroting terminology used by the Chinese Foreign Ministry." They added: "The people of Taiwan have earned the right to conduct their elections without coercion from our government, the government of the People's Republic of China, or anyone else, and we should respect their right to do so."³¹

Former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton has gone even further than other supporters of Taiwan. In an August speech in Taipei, he urged the Bush administration to restore diplomatic relations with Taiwan, asserting

confidently that Beijing would take no substantive actions in response.³²

The U.S. House of Representatives has weighed in on Taiwan policy with a number of pro-Taiwan resolutions. In late July 2007, the House passed by voice vote a measure urging the Bush administration to allow top Taiwanese officials to visit Washington freely. Introduced by Taiwan Caucus Co-Chairman Steve Chabot (R-OH), and signed by 46 co-sponsors, the resolution expressed the “sense of Congress” that “restrictions on visits to the U.S. by high-level elected and appointed officials of Taiwan, including the democratically elected president of Taiwan should be lifted.” The resolution also urged the onset of meetings and discussions between the two governments at the Cabinet level – something that had not occurred since Washington shifted diplomatic recognition to the PRC in 1979.³³

When the Bush administration, in part to show dissatisfaction with the conduct of Chen’s government, delayed making a decision about selling the latest generation of F-16 fighters to Taiwan, the House again expressed its disagreement with the president’s course. On Oct. 2, 2007, the House by voice vote adopted a resolution urging the administration to proceed with the US\$4 billion sale.³⁴

The following month, 18 House Republicans and one Democrat introduced a resolution explicitly supporting Taiwan’s membership in the United Nations.³⁵ That position had been endorsed earlier in a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed by former senator and Republican presidential nominee Bob Dole and in a *Washington Times* op-ed by three members of the Congressional Taiwan Caucus.³⁶ Those who supported U.N. membership for Taiwan reflected the views of a majority of Americans. A *National Journal* poll conducted in late September 2007 found that 55 percent of respondents backed a seat for Taiwan in the world body, while less than a quarter disagreed.³⁷

Although the Senate, perhaps more cognizant of the damaging effects strongly pro-Taiwan policies might have on relations with China, declined to act on any of the resolutions in the last session of Congress, the episodes are nevertheless significant. The extent of backing for such measures in the House suggests a

strong reservoir of congressional support for Taiwan. Public opinion data (albeit limited) suggest considerable public support as well. Moreover, the support appears to extend beyond merely a commitment to defend the island from outright PRC aggression. It includes backing for Taiwan's democratic prerogatives and aspirations for international recognition of its status as a sovereign state. Any future U.S. administration must take such public and congressional attitudes into account.

Implications of a Democratic Taiwan

The emergence of a democratic Taiwan has important consequences for both Washington and Beijing. U.S. officials are unaccustomed to dealing with a vibrant, fractious Taiwanese client that is inclined to respect Washington's policy preferences only up to a point. U.S. policy regarding the Taiwan issue has long been based on the assumption that Taipei would follow America's policy lead. In particular, U.S. officials expected their Taiwanese counterparts not to take actions that needlessly heightened cross-Strait tensions – especially when Washington sends signals for caution. The mere fact that Taiwan was dependent on the United States for the island's defense was deemed sufficient to ensure cooperative behavior.

That may have been true under the authoritarian regimes of Chiang Kai-shek and Chiang Ching-kuo, which did not have to respect the wishes of the Taiwanese public. (Although even the elder Chiang sometimes made statements and adopted positions that worried U.S. leaders.) Whatever the validity of Washington's assumptions about Taipei's behavior before Taiwan's democratic transformation in the 1990s, the situation has changed dramatically. In a democratic system, a government runs serious political risks if it pursues policies that run counter to public opinion. That is especially true of a DPP government that must placate the party's base, which is strongly in favor of independence. When faced with a choice between defying the sentiment of the party rank and file or ignoring Washington's wishes, U.S. leaders should not be surprised when DPP officials opt for the latter. That was a frequent pattern in Chen Shui-bian's ad-

ministration.

But even a KMT government would likely find its options constrained by Taiwanese public opinion. True, most Taiwanese (outside the camp of pro-independence DPP hardliners) are wary of going too far in provoking China. At the same time, support for asserting a distinct Taiwanese identity and gaining international recognition for Taiwan's status as a sovereign state has been steadily gaining traction.

Neither Beijing nor Washington seems to adequately grasp the implications of a democratic Taiwan. PRC officials frequently act as though it is 1988 instead of 2008, and that Washington can dictate to Taipei. Indeed, the PRC has been growing more insistent that Washington rein-in its Taiwanese client. "Chen Shui-bian is bold and aggressive due to backing from the United States," contended Zhou Qing, a veteran Taiwan watcher for the PRC and a person who has connections to the highest decision-making echelons. "The United States is the key. We need to work on the United States."³⁸ That same attitude was present in late 2007 and early 2008 as Chinese leaders pressed the Bush administration to prevent Taiwan from holding a referendum on the U.N. membership issue.³⁹

In part, the strategy of working through Washington reflects a realization that direct PRC pressure on Taiwan has often proved counterproductive. For example, Chinese missile tests in the Strait leading up to Taiwan's presidential election in 1996 served only to balloon the margin of victory for hard-line candidate Lee Teng-hui and weaken support for the pro-Beijing New Party. Similarly, bombastic Chinese rhetoric in the months before the 2000 presidential election may well have contributed to the victory of Chen Shui-bian. Prodding U.S. policy-makers to pressure Taipei indicates a more subtle approach. But that strategy also greatly overestimates Washington's leverage with Taipei.

A related fallacious assumption held by PRC officials is that business interests in the United States, allied with such practitioners of realpolitik as Henry

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Kissinger and Brent Scowcroft, will ensure a pro-Chinese tilt to American policy on cross-strait issues. They expect that U.S. policy will be driven by rational calculations that focus on China's crucial economic importance to America as well as the PRC's significance as a player on such strategic issues as North Korea and Iran.

That expectation is not entirely unwarranted. There is anecdotal evidence that Fortune 500 firms and even smaller entities with economic stakes in China urge U.S. officials to maintain a cooperative relationship with Beijing and to mute support for Taiwan. Major political players in both parties have likewise placed a high priority on good relations with China, and have sometimes viewed an assertive Taiwan as an irritant. It is no accident that many Taiwanese opinion leaders openly loathe Kissinger-style "realists," and they rankled at what they regarded as undue pressure from officials in the Clinton administration to appease China.⁴⁰ At least some of the Bush administration's retreat from its early enthusiastic support for Taiwan may be attributable to pressure from business interests and realist foreign policy elders lobbying for a more cautious policy.

Nevertheless, the emergence of a democratic Taiwan has boosted support for the island from other sources, and Beijing does not appear to grasp the import of that development. American policy on Taiwan and most other issues is rarely driven solely by unemotional calculations of realpolitik and economic self-interest. Moreover, the extent of congressional and public hostility to China is on the rise for reasons that have little to do with the Taiwan issue. Complaints about product safety, currency manipulation, Beijing's support for the odious governments in Sudan and Burma and meager cooperation on the Iranian nuclear crisis have all combined to create a surge of anti-PRC sentiment. That is the broader domestic context in which policy regarding Taiwan and mainland China must be viewed.

Moreover, it is important to remember that there is a strong moral component to American foreign policy on most issues. If Beijing decides at some point to adopt a coercive policy toward Taiwan (to say nothing of an outright military offensive), it would risk igniting the wrath of Americans who admire Taiwan's

vibrant democracy. There would almost certainly be intense congressional and public pressure on an administration not to let an authoritarian regime get away with committing aggression against a sister democracy. Invocations of the parallels between U.S. inaction in such a case and the British and French betrayal of democratic Czechoslovakia at Munich in 1938 would be standard fare.

Consequently, even if a U.S. military confrontation with China over a Taiwan Strait crisis made little sense from the standpoint of America's economic and diplomatic self-interest, it is highly probable that the pressure to defend democratic Taiwan would be irresistible. Beijing needs to appreciate the importance of Taiwan's democratic appeal in the United States and understand the risks the PRC would incur if it attempted to use force against the island. Given the current attitudes of Chinese officials, the danger of a miscalculation is disturbingly high.

America's relationship with a democratic Taiwan places the United States in a delicate and perilous position. Because of the growing role of public opinion in Taiwan, Washington's influence over a Taiwanese government (even a KMT one) is going to be noticeably less than it was during the island's authoritarian period. That creates a disturbing dynamic. A democratic Taiwan means more congressional and public support for respecting Taipei's policy preferences, even when those conflict with U.S. wishes, and especially more support for defending the island in the event of a crisis. At the same time, because Washington has decreasing influence over Taipei's actions, the danger that Taiwanese officials might adopt policies that provoke Beijing is greater than before. That creates the worst possible combination: an implicit American obligation to defend a client state over which the United States has little or no control. U.S. policy-makers need to reassess all aspects of its policy on the Taiwan issue before America stumbles into a crisis.

The implied U.S. obligation to Taiwan to intervene with forces in the event of a crisis should be rescinded.

From the standpoint of prudence, the defense commitment to Taiwan is unwise. As China's economic leverage and military capabilities grow, it becomes

increasingly problematic and dangerous for the United States to act as Taiwan's protector. The best strategy for the United States would be to limit its risk exposure by confining its role to selling arms to Taipei. The implied obligation contained in the *Taiwan Relations Act* to intervene with U.S. forces in the event of a crisis should be rescinded. But given the widespread appeal of Taiwan's democratic system, such a policy change would be extraordinarily difficult to execute. Indeed, we may see an increase in domestic support for shielding Taiwan from PRC coercion. America thus finds itself in a troubling bind. Rational strategic calculations call for a major shift in policy, but domestic political realities in the United States probably preclude such an adjustment. That dilemma may ultimately prove to be the most significant consequence of Taiwan's emergence as a modern democracy. ☹

Notes

¹ For examples of that argument, see David Lague, "Taiwan Election May Ease Tensions With China," *New York Times*, Jan. 14, 2008; Edward Cody, "Despite Victory, Taiwanese Party Urges Caution," *Washington Post*, Jan. 14, 2008; Parris Lee Choon, Wei Yi Lim and Jason Dean, "Taiwan Vote May Boost China Ties," *Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 14, 2008; and Jonathan Adams, "Opposition Win May Bring Taiwan Closer to China," *Christian Science Monitor*, Jan. 14, 2008.

² "Bridging the Divide: A Vision for Peace in East Asia," A speech by Dr. Ma Ying-jeou, mayor of Taipei and chairman of the KMT, at the London School of Economics and Political Science, Feb. 13, 2006, text, p. 13.

³ *Ibid.* Emphasis added. Congruence is an extraordinarily high standard.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Taiwan Thinktank, "Cross-Strait Relations: Two Years after the Passage of China's Anti-Secession Law," *Public Opinion Survey*, March 9-11, 2007.

⁶ Mainland Affairs Council Press Release, no. 105, Sept. 22, 2006, <http://www.mac.gov.tw/english/news/06105.htm>.

⁷ Mainland Affairs Council Press Release no. 067, Aug. 17, 2007, <http://www.mac.gov.tw/english/english/news/07067.htm>.

⁸ *Ibid.* Such results cast doubt on the thesis of Boston College professor Robert Ross about the trend of Taiwanese public sentiment. See Robert S. Ross, "Taiwan's Fading Independence Movement," *Foreign Affairs*, 85, no. 2 (March-April 2006), pp. 141-48. It is true that most Taiwanese are wary of provoking a crisis with Beijing by pushing the issue of formal independence, but strong majorities embrace the current de facto independence, and a significant faction hopes for formal independence in the long term. Conversely, support for

reunification, now or in the future, seems very weak.

⁹ On the shift in the Bush administration's Taiwan policy between early 2001 and late 2003, see Ted Galen Carpenter, *America's Coming War with China: A Collision Course over Taiwan* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 124-133. For a detailed analysis of the delicate and increasingly contentious relationship between Washington and Taipei during the Bush years, see Kerry Dumbaugh, "Taiwan-U.S. Relations: New Strains and Changes," *CRS Report to Congress*, Oct. 10, 2006.

¹⁰ For example, see Sean McCormack, State Department spokesman, comments at *Daily Press Briefing*, June 19, 2007, transcript, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2007/jun/86611.htm>; "U.S., China Join Forces to Warn Taiwan over U.N. Bid," *Agence France Presse*, Sept. 6, 2007; Thomas Christensen, Speech to U.S.-Taiwan Business Council, Defense Industry Conference, Annapolis, MD, Sept. 11, 2007; and Shih Hsiu-chuan, "U.N. Referendum Would Hurt Trust: Young," *Taipei Times*, Nov. 10, 2007.

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