

**U.S. Policy after the Taiwan Election: Divining the Future**  
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There are at least two fundamental reasons to pay close attention to the upcoming Taiwan presidential election:

First, the election results could—and likely will—constitute an important turning point—in one direction or another—for the future of cross-Strait relations.

Second, and related to that, the Taiwan problem is probably the only issue in the world today that could lead to war between two major powers, indeed, two nuclear powers. It is thus of profound importance for the two parties directly concerned, for the United States, and for the region and the world.

U.S. policy is hardly the only variable. But it not only is a crucial factor, it is the one over which Americans arguably have some control and thus merits their particular attention.

I want to talk about the nature of the issue and how it evolved, and to offer some thoughts about the choices facing American policymakers and how, in my judgment, they should approach the choices.

**What is the issue we face?** Setting aside for the moment the election next week and the difference that the outcome might make, let me lay out the broad dimensions of the issue as I see them.

In a basic sense, what we have is a tension between the bottom-line insistence on the PRC side on the “one China principle”—that is, that there *is* “one China” and Taiwan is part of it—and the insistence on the part of the people in Taiwan that, at the end of the day, they must be able to determine their own future.

I would argue that, despite their surface contradiction, these are not necessarily incompatible concepts and, in any event, need not prevent effective management of the issue and avoidance of a crisis. It is when either side seeks to flesh out these concepts, to define them with greater precision and to push those definitions in ways to suit its own preferences, that one runs up against incompatibilities.

I also believe that for some time, but now more clearly than ever, the PRC goal in any foreseeable future, is not to press for reunification, but to block development—and acceptance—of “juridical independence” of Taiwan, not from the PRC, but from “China.”

That then raises the question of whether the current Taiwan government’s insistence on—not simply believing but pressing the case that Taiwan—or the “ROC”—is a “sovereign, independent state” under the banner of *yi bian, yi guo*, and seeking to consolidate and even institutionalize it, will trigger just such a use of force.

One still hears PRC rhetoric about how all people in Taiwan yearn for reunification with the “motherland.” Nonetheless, I think that there has evolved in the mainland, at least among officials and specialists dealing with Taiwan, a very clear understanding about attitudes in Taiwan. They see not only that there is no such widespread yearning, but that polls showing a strong preference in Taiwan for maintaining the “status quo” notwithstanding, voters on the island would snap up an independence option if it were available without risk. I think that the mainland even understands that most people in Taiwan agree with Chen Shui-bian that Taiwan—or the ROC—is a sovereign, independent state unconnected to the PRC.

More than that, if one examines Jiang Zemin’s “eight point proposal” of 1995 carefully—a proposal just reaffirmed by PRC Premier Wen Jiabao—and notes some of the refinements made to the PRC position since then, one cannot but come to the conclusion that the “Taiwan question” today comes down largely to a matter of political symbolism, not on-the-ground reality.

But that symbolism is powerful on all sides and has very significant consequences—in its most extreme form including the possibility, as I have said, of war.

So when I describe the problem as largely one of political symbolism, I do not mean in any way to dismiss it as not being enormously important and difficult. But I do mean to suggest that it

should not be beyond the wit of creative thinkers and policy makers to manage this problem successfully—and safely—even if ultimate “resolution” remains out of reach for a long time to come.

However, if symbolism is pushed on the Taiwan side beyond the level of PRC tolerance, I believe it would be a grave error to underestimate PRC willingness to use force, even if the costs of doing so are quite high.

**How did we get to a point where war is in one sense so unthinkable yet in another looms as a real-world, if not high-probability, prospect?**

I don't have the time, and you don't have the patience, for a recitation of Taiwan's relationship with the mainland, either in terms of more ancient history or simply since the 1940s, or even the 1990s. Nor do I intend to weigh you down with the ins and outs of U.S. policy toward this question. But I do think it would be helpful to lay out some basic facts, at least as I see them.

First, as to the Taiwan-mainland relationship, while I agree that Taiwan has never been part of the PRC, I also think it is unsustainable to argue that Taiwan was never part of “China.” That doesn't mean it always has been, or that it always has to be, or even to take a position on its status today, but simply to recognize that it was so connected, at times more tenuously, at times more integratedly, before 1895.

Second, while the United States and others have not taken the position that Taiwan was returned to China after World War II, arguing about that from a legal perspective may be emotionally satisfying or intellectually engaging, but it is not going to be terribly productive. The issue is quintessentially a political problem, not a legal one.

Third, although it is true that neither the Chinese Nationalists nor the Chinese Communists paid much attention to Taiwan—or made claims on it—until the 1940s, it is equally true that what we think of today as Taiwanese nationalism or Taiwanese identity also only really developed after the late 1940s.

All of that being said, these various claims and identities are no less potent for being relatively recent, and we all understand that each of them has intensified over time. But while there is no

point in arguing about their origins, there is a point in at least understanding them, if for no other reason than that they demonstrate nothing is immutable.

I would argue that one of the important disconnects today is that the people in Taiwan by and large no longer see the cross-Strait relationship as the unfinished business either of China's restoration and a righting of the wrongs of 1895, on the one hand, or of the Chinese Civil War, on the other. But in the mainland they do.

And as to the U.S. role, while the United States would no longer object to reunification, as it would have in 1950—indeed it is now openly agnostic on that issue—Washington still sees it in the U.S. strategic national interest that Taiwan's status and relationship with the mainland not be determined through coercion or use of force. The fact that Taiwan is today a flourishing democracy and market economy strongly reinforces that view.

Normalization of U.S.-PRC relations in the 1970s resolved none of these issues, but it did create a framework for managing them—quite successfully for the most part, even though there have been some serious lapses when one party or another has violated the “rules.”

But because of the enormous changes in the world, the region and both Taiwan and the PRC since the time of normalization, each party's attitudes toward—even tolerance of—certain kinds of situations and behaviors has also changed.

For example, the PRC's stated goal *was* for the U.S. to butt out of cross-Strait issues. As Deng Xiaoping once put it to Secretary of State Cyrus Vance: “As for the method by which we reunify Taiwan with the motherland, let us Chinese worry about that. We Chinese do have the ability to solve our own issues. There is no need whatever for American friends to worry themselves over such issues.”

Today Beijing is virtually insisting that the U.S. butt in, if not to the point of supporting reunification—which the PRC would like but realistically does not expect—at least to the extent of blocking movement toward independence. The reasons are pretty obvious, but that doesn't make the change any less striking.

Another example: whereas Taiwan was willing to live with the ambiguities of “one China”—indeed embraced “one China” in the 1970s, that is not the case in Taiwan anymore—certainly not the view of the present government even “in principle”—and there are even some questions about how Taiwan will cope with that concept if the pan-blue slate wins next week. Those questions arise not only because of pure politics in Taiwan, though that is a major factor. But the other more fundamental explanation is related to societal changes in Taiwan that will continue to go on regardless of the election results.

Again, that does not mean a “one China” framework is out of the question; I actually believe it is quite workable. But it does mean that fashioning it will require more skill, creativity and flexibility than ever before.

**If we try to think of alternative cross-Strait futures**, even if we can’t quite envision the shape of an “ultimate resolution,” developments over the next few months and years will matter a great deal.

Words and concepts are being used today which, pushed to an extreme, could be very troubling. Everyone says the goal is to “maintain the *status quo*.” But everyone means something different.

What the government in Taipei means is to maintain Taiwan, under the name “Republic of China,” as a “sovereign, independent state.” The PRC means maintaining a *status quo* in which, in principle, there is “one China” and Taiwan is part of it, and at the very least there is no “juridically independent” Taiwan. The U.S. views the *status quo* as a state of peace and stability in the Strait and believes that maintaining it requires that no party seek unilaterally to press its definition of sovereignty on others.

These differences are obvious and long-standing, and we have all coexisted with them for some time. But the question is whether, in the period ahead, one side or the other will make a push seen as threatening to the core interests of the other. If so, things could turn in a very tense direction.

The issue of a “new constitution” for the ROC could, for example, engage some of these questions, both in terms of its substance and the process used for achieving it. I think we are all familiar with the state of play.

There is widespread agreement in Taiwan that the current constitution is inadequate to the needs of present-day Taiwan. But the issue is whether the form of changes to the constitution, their content, their interpretation, and the process for achieving their adoption will, however broad objectives are described, force the issue. The Taiwan government says no, many people in Beijing say yes.

The constitutional issue is complicated and in many respects ill-defined, and different people even within the DPP itself, not to mention in other parties within Taiwan, have rather different views about it. Suffice it to say, however, that handling of that issue could have profound implications for future peace and stability in the Strait.

Whoever wins the election next week, I would hope that Beijing will adopt a more flexible stance on issues such as resuming cross-Strait dialogue and affording Taiwan what has come to be called “international space.” I believe the PRC has erred in its approach over recent years and missed the opportunity to satisfy at least a number of the aspirations of the people in Taiwan for a more appropriate role in international society, even if not the one they would also like of a sovereign state. I would even be willing to make the case that if Beijing had, as I openly advocated at the time, cooperated in allowing Taiwan an “observer” role at the World Health Assembly in 2003, they might not face the prospect of the referenda next week that they find so troubling.

In any case, that would be my *hope*. My *expectation* is rather more cautious, since the level of mistrust in Beijing about the ambitions of Taiwan are so deep and pervasive that those in the mainland who might advocate a policy of inducements rather than pressure are currently very much on the defensive. To be quite blunt, if the pan-green wins next week, and if they proceed with the kind of program that President Chen Shui-bian has outlined, my own expectation is that the PRC will ratchet up pressure on Taiwan to rein in—and on Washington to rein Taiwan in—before the situation gets to the point that PRC leaders feel they must respond forcefully.

I am not suggesting use of military force is inevitable, and repeat that I would hope that Beijing will be far more creative and reasonable in its approach to Taiwan after the election than it has been in recent years. But I am also concerned that no one in Taiwan should miscalculate PRC intentions, or American interests.

If the pan-blue wins, it does not take a crystal ball to see that the PRC has hopes for a more manageable situation. At the same time, I think there is a growing recognition in the mainland about the sorts of societal changes in Taiwan that I spoke of earlier, and a recognition not only that no political leader in Taiwan will undertake a sellout of Taiwan's interests, but that great care will need to be taken to avoid even a hint of such a development. So things may be more complicated than the optimists envisage.

I'd raise two specific issues in this connection. First, whether it is in response to a pan-blue victory or, under whatever circumstances, even to a pan-green government, I hope that when Beijing moves to accord Taiwan more "international space," it does not do so by presenting Taiwan as its little brother—as a "part of China" whose entry onto the world stage Beijing is sponsoring as something less than an equal. The circumstances, of course, are quite different, but the current PRC emphasis on Hong Kong as "China's Hong Kong"—and all that goes with that—is what I would call a "negative example" of what would be effective with Taiwan.

Of course the PRC will not tolerate Taiwan acquiring "sovereign" status. But to reap the benefits of a new approach, Beijing will need, nonetheless, to avoid that sort of condescending—and counterproductive—approach.

Second, and of more fundamental importance, I would at least raise the possibility that the two sides could talk about and eventually negotiate an end-of-hostilities agreement. Taiwan, of course, has long since called an end to the state of national emergency. But the PRC, too—under the 1995 eight-point proposal—envisaged a formal end to the state of hostilities as a "step toward" ultimate reunification under the principle of "one China."

The benefits would be many and fairly obvious. But to belabor the obvious for a moment, the whole question of a military build-up against Taiwan—in the form of missiles or otherwise—could be made to largely go away. And Taiwan arms sales could be cast in a new and—as seen from Beijing—less provocative mode, with major implications for the U.S. role and U.S. security interests.

No one needs to be told that this would not be easy—or the first item on anyone's agenda. But I raise it because I want to suggest that while we now have to think of much darker scenarios—and

how to avoid them—it is not inconceivable that, if things are handled skillfully, in a real-world scenario we could be thinking in quite different ways, as well.

**So, against this background, how should we think about U.S. interests and policy choices in the period ahead?**

Maybe I am too personally invested in what has gone before to think “outside the box,” as people like to put it. But I believe the U.S. position—perhaps not always as implemented but at least as generally articulated—has been right.

That is, now even more than in the Cold War era, a strong, constructive relationship with China is fundamentally in the U.S. national interest, as it is in China’s. I don’t think I need to belabor the reasons why.

But it is also true now as much as in the past, perhaps even more so as PRC capabilities grow, that we must manage the Taiwan issue well lest it disrupt that relationship, perhaps devastatingly so for the people in Taiwan.

Managing it well means ensuring that issues between the two sides of the Strait are only resolved peacefully—and consensually.

It means being actively involved, not by forcing a resolution on one side or the other, but, as Secretary of State George Shultz once put it, through “foster[ing] an environment” in which cross-Strait trade and exchanges and a relaxation of tensions can take place. And it means encouraging dialogue between the parties in the most effective way we can.

It means fully coordinating policy to the extent possible with Taipei and Beijing. The objective, on the one hand, would be to optimize satisfaction to both sides of the Strait, if possible, including through expanding Taiwan’s “international space” in ways acceptable to Beijing. But, on the other hand, it also means avoiding nasty surprises and averting crises, and devising measures to ensure that *American* interests are taken into account by both sides, just as we need to take account of theirs.

It also means coordinating policy *within* the U.S. government—not always easy and certainly not always successful—but, I would argue, more essential than ever.

It means ensuring that our senior leaders take the time to understand the history of this issue—what U.S. policy is, and is not—and why. What the nuances are, and why. Where the ambiguities are, and why. And what the full scope of our interests is and how—even if those interests sometimes seem contradictory—they can be made to mesh if handled well.

No one who has had responsibility for trying to shape or implement policy in this arena would ever claim it is easy or even comfortable. It is sometimes tempting to turn to “simple,” straightforward approaches. “Tell Taiwan that if it provokes a PRC attack, we will not help in their self-defense.” Or, at the other extreme, “Tell the PRC it is time to face facts—Taiwan is a sovereign, independent state, so ‘get over it’—learn to live with that fact and all that it implies.”

Tempting, but I would argue, ultimately unsustainable—and, in the end, highly dangerous. We cannot simply walk away from our concern for Taiwan’s security and well-being any more than we can turn our backs on the deep and broadening interests we have in strong, productive relations with the PRC.

So I apologize if the subtitle of this talk—divining the future—was misleading and brought you here under false pretenses. But as we await the democratic verdict of the people in Taiwan in ten days, I believe that all of us interested in this issue have a lot to think about.

And for those of us who are Americans, I can think of few other issues that are as fraught with more serious, long-term consequences for our own well-being—our security, our prosperity, or our values. This is serious stuff, and it merits our best thinking.