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SPECIAL ISSUE

Washington-Taipei Relations at a Crossroads



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Washington-Taipei Relations at a Crossroads: Introduction

Gang Lin and Jacques deLisle

Elections of new leaders in Taiwan and the United States in 2016—and, less dramatically, the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the 2017 session of the National People's Congress in China—have changed the domestic landscapes that shape U.S.-Taiwan relations. The two elections brought to office leaders who are significantly different from their opposite party predecessors. In Taiwan, voters selected Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文), the candidate of the traditionally proindependence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which last held power during 2000–2008—a period of chronic tension and occasional crises in cross-Strait relations. In the United States, Donald Trump came to office with palpable disdain for Washington's established ways and with a foreign policy and national security policy team that was sparse, unconventional, and strikingly thin in experience and expertise in Taiwan and cross-Strait policies. The approach of the first Party Congress held

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fully under Xi Jinping's leadership had triggered much speculation about possible changes in cross-Strait policy although, in the end, adjustments were limited to a marginally tougher line toward Taiwan (as well as striking indications of Xi's consolidation of power), but no major changes in Beijing's approach to cross-Strait issues.

These developments brought renewed uncertainty and, in turn, greater international attention to the Taiwan issue in general. Between 2008 and 2016, with Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) and the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, KMT) in power in Taiwan, cross-Strait relations were characterized by "peaceful development." As rapprochement proceeded and the crises that marked Chen Shui-bian's (陳水扁) tenure as Taiwan's leader receded, the Taiwan issue faced possible marginalization in Washington. Taiwan became a much less central and fraught factor in a U.S.-China relationship that had grown complex and increasingly beset by other areas of friction, many of them related to China's rising power.

On Taiwan policy, some analysts in the United States revived and adapted an old theme: that Taiwan soon would, or at least should, cease to be a strategic concern for the United States. Examples of strong forms of this view include Bruce Gilley's notion of the "Finlandization of Taiwan"—suggesting that the United States should seek to "promote long-term peace through closer economic, social, and political ties" between Taiwan and the Chinese mainland rather than "using Taiwan to balance the power of a rising China"; and Charles Glaser's argument that the United States should avoid conflicts with "a rising China by backing away from its commitments to Taiwan." Rapidly improving cross-Strait relations could make such assessments and prescriptions more credible.

From very different perspectives, other analysts pushed back, arguing that the United States should not "abandon Taiwan" because to do so would be contrary to U.S. international security interests and "values" commitments (to human rights and democracy). Proponents of this set of views include Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, Bonnie Glaser, and Shelley Rigger.² For these assessments, Taiwan's apparent or possible marginalization in U.S. policy after 2008 was a trajectory to be resisted.

With Tsai and then Trump coming to power, and with renewed tensions in cross-Strait relations and growing economic and strategic frictions between Beijing and Washington, questions about U.S.-Taiwan relations—and their interaction with cross-Strait and U.S.-China relations—came again to the fore: How much would the immediate future depart from this recent past? So far, evidence has been mixed.

Tsai consistently pledged continuity and stability in her approach to cross-Strait relations and did not reprise the more provocative approach of the Chen Shui-bian years. Nonetheless, her position as a leader from the DPP, her refusal to adopt the 1992 Consensus and the one-China principle conditions set by Beijing, and various statements and actions that Beijing regarded as unacceptably pro-independence corresponded to rising frictions in cross-Strait relations. After his election, Trump and his team careened among strikingly different positions, including an unprecedented telephone call between the U.S. president-elect and Tsai; a statement that the long-standing U.S. one-China policy might be abandoned; a pledge by Trump to Xi that the United States would continue to honor the one-China policy; a push for China's cooperation on North Korea and other issues that raised the prospect that Taiwan might become a mere bargaining chip; and a return to traditional reaffirmations of the Taiwan Relations Act, the Three Communiqués and a "stable" and "enduring" bilateral relationship. In Beijing, Xi's report to the 19th Party Congress confirmed widespread expectations of fundamental continuity in China's policies toward Taiwan and reiterated familiar legal and political positions. However, Xi's address adopted a seemingly stern tone on Taiwan, coupled Taiwan policy with a more self-confident posture in China's relations with the outside world, and was framed by the "cold peace" or "cold confrontation" that had defined cross-Strait relations following Tsai's coming to power.

Assessments of the significance of these developments occur against the backdrop of more macro-level assessments of the U.S.-Taiwan relationship that draw on international relations theories. From the perspective of Realism, U.S.-Taiwan relations live in the shadow of great power relations between the United States and China. On this view, when Taiwan leaders' choices and troubled cross-Strait relations threaten to undermine U.S.-China relations, Washington and Beijing may turn to de facto co-management of the trilateral relationship, as happened during Chen's tenure. That state of affairs had greatly strained U.S.-Taiwan relations and provided fodder for Realist arguments that favor abandoning Taiwan. On the other hand, when U.S.-China relations are more adversarial, Taiwan can look, also from a Realist perspective, like a valuable asset and quasi-ally for the United States—a perspective that characterized U.S.-Taiwan relations through much of the Cold War and that can hold renewed appeal to analysts and policymakers who foresee serious rivalry between the United States and a rising China. In Realist frameworks, Taiwan has limited and shrinking—but still real—agency in shaping U.S.-Taiwan relations. This aspect has been the focus, for example, of U.S. and Taiwan scholars who have offered analytical frameworks that cast Taiwan as a leg—often, and increasingly, the weakest one—of an unequal triangular relationship, or as a tail that can sometimes wag two dogs.³

Liberal theories of international relations tend to point to a more sanguine assessment of U.S.-Taiwan relations. U.S.-Taiwan ties, on this view, are a product of pluralistic domestic politics—much of it favoring close ties-in both places, and draw significant support from shared democratic values and similar political systems. Yet, liberalism as a foundation for U.S.-Taiwan relations has its limits. The bilateral relationship is far from immune to disruption based on leaders' political choices or calculations of great power strategic interests, which push the United States to prioritize relations with China. More fundamentally for U.S.-Taiwan relations, Constructivist theories of international relations have dovetailed with liberalism in a way that can challenge the U.S.-Taiwan relationship: When U.S. foreign policy has sought to engage China, and enmesh China in the international order, with the goal of promoting reform and assimilation to global norms by China, relations with Taiwan take a back seat or worse, especially when U.S. ties to Taipei seem to impede Washington's agenda of constructive—and Constructivist engagement with Beijing.

Finally, Institutionalist theories of international relations point to significant and persistent ambivalence in U.S.-Taiwan relations. For those who see formal institutions or robustly institutionalized norms and practices as key factors in international relations, Taiwan and U.S.-Taiwan relations occupy a fraught middle ground. Washington supports Taiwan's ardent pursuit of international space, informal relations with the governments of other states, meaningful participation in major international institutions (such as the specialized agencies of the United Nations), and membership in organizations for which statehood is not a requirement for accession. However, the United States has acquiesced in Beijing's one-China-based insistence that Taiwan not enjoy recognition or formal diplomatic ties, not be allowed to join state-member-only organizations, participate in international organizations only under names other than Taiwan or the Republic of China, and so on.

To address what the events of 2016 and subsequent developments mean for the perennial question of relations between Washington and

Taipei, a symposium on "Key Factors Shaping U.S.-Taiwan Relations" was convened in Shanghai, immediately after the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Participants included scholars from the United States, the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong, and Macau. Five of the papers presented at that symposium are included, in revised form, in this special issue, along with one additional paper by a scholar from Taiwan. Earlier versions of the six articles included in this special issue were presented at a second symposium, held at the Center for Taiwan Studies at Shanghai Jiao Tong University in September 2017. The authors have again revised their articles for inclusion in this collection. Collectively, the articles in this issue examine Washington-Taipei relations, primarily from the perspectives of domestic politics in Taiwan and the United States, the relationship of U.S.-Taiwan relations to cross-Strait relations and U.S.-China relations, and U.S. regional and global strategies.

Jacques deLisle discusses the impact of Tsai Ing-wen's and Donald Trump's coming to power on U.S.-Taiwan relations. According to deLisle, several factors support continuity in recently strong U.S.-Taiwan relations. Washington welcomed Tsai's approach of pledging to maintain the status quo in cross-Strait ties. The U.S. policy on cross-Strait issues that he characterizes as the "clarity of strategic ambiguity" endures: Washington assesses which side is at fault for any deterioration in cross-Strait relations, and favors, at least at the margin, the other party. With Tsai, Washington sees Beijing as primarily at fault, in that Washington perceives Tsai as having gone as far as she can (given political constraints), and Beijing as being too demanding. Although Trump administration policies and actions—specific ones concerning Taiwan and broader ones with implications for U.S.-Taiwan relations—and an approach to foreign policy characterized by volatility, a transactional mind-set, and institutional fragmentation introduced significant uncertainty, persisting features of U.S. policy toward Taiwan and cross-Strait issues limit the likelihood of change in Washington's approach to relations with Taiwan: the durability of strategic ambiguity, the classic alliance dilemma of abandonment versus entrapment, the persistence of Realist, interest-based analysis that weighs against "abandoning Taiwan" during a long period of more adversarial U.S.-China relations, the likely durability of the "values" strain in U.S. foreign policy, the entrenched nature of the Three Communiqués and, especially, the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), a robust congressional role in the stewardship of U.S.-Taiwan relations, and the tendency of U.S. policy on Taiwan and cross-Strait issues to be primarily reactive to choices made in Beijing and Taipei.

Weixing Hu explores the impact of U.S. domestic politics and U.S.-China relations on cross-Taiwan Strait relations. According to Hu, following Donald Trump's surprise victory, his presidency has been full of uncertainties. Although Trump has developed a good working relationship with Chinese President Xi Jinping, he has not clearly articulated a China policy, possibly because of diverging views among his senior advisors and possibly because of his deal-making, transactional approach to policy. This matters for U.S.-Taiwan relations because U.S. China policy and interactions between the two great powers have great impact on cross-Strait relations and, in turn, relations between Washington and Taipei. As the two sides of the Taiwan Strait have been unable to come to a new formulation that is equivalent to the "1992 Consensus" (but also have not sought to escalate to serious confrontation), the future of cross-Strait relations likely will be a situation of "muddling through" or "cold peace," provided that there is no new provocative push from Taipei for de jure independence. While the United States and China have different views on the current stalemate across the Taiwan Strait and Taiwan's importance to the United States is in decline, Beijing and Washington have a shared interest in avoiding conflict and maintaining peace and stability. Neither President Trump nor President Xi wants the Taiwan issue to become the top priority in their bilateral relationship. Although the Trump administration, has repackaged the Obama administration's Asia-Pacific strategy of hedging and balancing against China in a new framework of Indo-Pacific strategy, with a tougher trade policy toward Beijing, Washington does not seem likely to depart radically from past U.S. approaches to cross-Strait issues. It has no interest in pushing Taipei and Beijing to the negotiating table.

Ji You and Yufan Hao assess the impact of cross-Strait military interactions on U.S. strategy towards Taiwan. With the civil war in China never formally terminated, the fundamental issue in cross-Strait relations is "peace or war," rather than "reunification or independence." Military tensions across the Strait have been woven into the geopolitics of regional major powers and have risen and fallen in response to internal politics of both sides. Militarization is an inherent risk, or feature, in cross-Strait politics because a lingering state of war is the background to all that happens in between the two sides. The prospect of war, however, is mitigated by a common desire among Beijing, Taipei, and Washington to maintain the status quo. Political considerations have kept military

options in check for the three parties, with the turn toward acts of militarization increasing or abating with the changes in the political atmosphere in cross-Strait relations. At present, a strategic challenge to the trilateral relationship is the unpredictability of the relationship between Beijing and Washington, which is vital to determining the nature and long-term trajectory of cross-Strait and U.S.-Taiwan relations. According to Ji and Hao, the U.S. emphasis on "peaceful means" has the effect of preempting China's reunification in that it deters Beijing's military action against Taipei. For Washington, the one-China policy is a framework for avoiding crisis, and maintaining the status quo. Although this policy has been stable, You and Hao warn that U.S. policy could change. If Washington sees China as a peer competitor, it might be more inclined to back Taiwan independence. Developments in U.S. security policies and practices under Trump suggest an ongoing trajectory toward viewing China as a rival.

Chih-Chieh Chou addresses the impact of contending notions of the cross-Strait status quo on U.S.-Taiwan relations. He finds that the differences between KMT and DPP views have receded in salience amid broad political support in Taiwan for the status quo, notwithstanding the differences between Ma's "1992 Consensus" and "one-China principle" and Tsai's rejection of those terms. Taiwanese support for the cross-Strait status quo, and Beijing's tolerance of it, have not meant consensus or harmony as the DPP, KMT, and CCP embrace divergent conceptions of the status quo. This has promoted deadlock and tension in cross-Strait relations. Support for the status quo by Taiwan has been, and remains under Trump, a precondition for U.S. support for Taiwan and, under Tsai (as under Ma but unlike under Chen), Taiwan continues to satisfy this precondition. With severe tensions between Tsai's government and Beling over an acceptable definition of the status quo of Taiwan's status and cross-Strait relations, with the cross-Strait balance of power ineluctably shifting in the Mainland's favor, and with the Trump administration a source of uncertainty, Taiwan faces growing pressure to find a way to define its interests, positions, and strategic or normative value in ways that reduce conflict with Beijing and retain support from Washington.

Yana Zuo argues broad features of, and changes in, the world order—rather than the policy preferences of individual leaders such as Trump—determine Washington's Taiwan policy. According to Zuo, the Taiwan issue and ambivalent U.S. attitudes toward Taiwan arose as a by-product of the U.S. global strategy during the Cold War. In the wake of the

collapse of the Soviet Union, the global strategic landscape changed from a "peace of equilibrium" into "hegemonic peace." As the only superpower, Washington began to pursue a values-driven Taiwan policy, informed by Taipei's emphasis on democratic reform—a policy that led Washington to give Taipei strong support. With the rise of China and the resulting transformation of the world order, however, Taiwan lost much of its value in serving the United States' strategic interests. After 9/11, the U.S. war on terror made the Bush administration, having recast the PRC from a "strategic competitor" to a "constructive partner," more open to accepting some of Beijing's terms on Taiwan. Additional changes may lie ahead that will further weaken U.S. support for Taiwan, including the further decline of U.S. leadership, China's ongoing rise, and the possible collapse of the Western alliance. By examining the Taiwan issue from the perspective of shifting world order, Zuo argues that the United States will eventually abandon Taiwan.

Gang Lin and Wenxing Zhou approach the puzzle of whether and to what degree Taiwan matters to the United States. According to them, the worsening of cross-Strait relations since 2016 has made Washington more concerned about the sustainability of the status quo. President Trump's phone conversation with Tsai Ing-wen and his attempt to link Washington's continued adherence to its one-China policy to bilateral economic deals between the two great powers have sent dual warning signals to both Taipei and Beijing. For the Mainland, the danger is the possible collapse of a key pillar of the U.S.-China diplomatic architecture; for Taiwan, the nightmare is that the businessman-turned-President might sell out the island for economic (or other) gains from the Mainland. Trump's aversion to liberal institutionalism and his advocacy of economic nationalism have revived the specter of Taiwan's abandonment, which occurred occasionally in U.S. foreign policy thinking since the late 1940s. Between 2009 and 2014, a good number of American scholars and policy advisors became more open to arguments in favor of "abandoning Taiwan." To be sure, "abandoning Taiwan" together with the Cold War mindset of playing the "Taiwan card" are both far from the mainstream view in U.S. policy circles, which favors maintaining the status quo. Still, such heterodox arguments have raised and made salient the fundamental issue of whether Taiwan is a strategic liability or a strategic asset for the United States. Which view prevails matters a great deal for the state of U.S.-China relations and whether that relationship will be more cooperative or confrontational in the years to come.

As the articles in this issue collectively suggest, even with the dramatic developments in domestic politics (especially in Taiwan and the United States) since the beginning of 2016, China-U.S. relations and cross-Strait relations are still key factors shaping U.S. policy toward Taiwan and U.S.-Taiwan relations. If U.S.-China relations and cross-Strait relations are bad, Washington is more likely to try to play the Taiwan Card in a troubled engagement with Beijing, which makes China the odd man out in the trilateral game. This appeared to be among the plausible future scenarios when Tsai came to power amid expectations that Hillary Clinton soon would be the U.S. president, and it remains a plausible scenario with Trump in office, especially as U.S.-China relations have moved toward a possible trade war. If both U.S.-China relations and cross-Strait relations are good, there is more likely to be growing closeness in cross-Strait ties, raising expectations of a possible resolution of the Taiwan issue and possible movement toward peaceful reunification. This was one plausible characterization of much of the 2008–2016 period. It could become salient once again during the era of Trump, Tsai, and Xi although early indicators suggest that this will not occur. If U.S.-China relations are good but cross-Strait relations are bad, Washington is likely to move toward a position of downgraded bilateral relations with Taipei and will face more potent calls for abandoning Taiwan. Under this arrangement, which characterized much of Chen's tenure as Taiwan's leader, Taipei becomes the odd man out. If U.S.-China relations are bad but cross-Strait relations are good, Washington is more likely to take a more hands-off policy and make itself the odd man out in the strategic triangle. Between these four quadrants lie intermediate patterns that are likely to bring little pressure to challenge the status quo. The foregoing points are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: U.S. Position on the Issue of Taiwan Shaped by External Environment

China-U.S. ties	Bad	Medium	Good	
Cross-Strait ties				
Bad	Play Taiwan card Mainland as the odd man out	Status quo	"Abandon" Taiwan Taiwan as the odd man out	
Medium	Status quo	Status quo	Status quo	
Good	Reluctant hands-off U.S. as the odd man out	Status quo	Accept deepening rapprochement / progress toward solution No odd man out (win-win-win)	

While these ideal types can help us to map out broad contours and trends in U.S. positions on Taiwan issues and prospects for U.S.-Taiwan relations, a key challenge for academics and policy analysts is to identify both these general features and more nuanced aspects of U.S. Taiwan policy and Washington-Taipei relations that are shaped by leaders' nearterm choices and domestic politics. As argued by the articles in this special issue, with Tsai and Trump in power, Washington is likely to continue its policy of strategic ambiguity and support a potentially vulnerable status quo across the Taiwan Strait. Under Trump, and despite the concerns which spiked during the post-election / pre-inauguration period that the new president might radically change traditional U.S. approaches to Taiwan and China policy, Washington is likely to maintain positive, and possibly increasingly strong, relations with Taipei, especially if the United States sees Taiwan under Tsai as not taking steps that threaten U.S. interests and, more broadly, if Washington consolidates a view of a rising or assertive China under Xi Jinping as on a path to becoming a near-peer competitor—or rival—of the United States (a perspective that figured prominently in the Trump administration's first National Security Strategy).

There remain several potential sources of more dramatic disruption in cross-Strait relations that can in turn pose challenges for U.S.-Taiwan relations. Will long-rising Taiwanese consciousness and long-growing Taiwanese identity interact with Tsai's and the DPP's political preferences or calculations, and beliefs that the United States will back Taiwan against pressures from Beijing, to pursue a less stable cross-Strait policy? Will Trump do something that echoes his brief threat to abandon the U.S. one-China policy, at the risk of damaging the U.S. administration's working relationship with the PRC, as well as stability in cross-Strait relations? Down these paths lie potential troubles for what has been in recent years a stable U.S.-Taiwan relationship.

Notes

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