

Prospects for Taiwan-U.S. Relations

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Few if any government officials, experts, or academics who have an interest in cross-Strait relations would challenge the idea that the next four years will likely be a time of great change and perhaps high tensions. Many problems in the relationships are intractable and will require political will, innovative policies, and the right people to address them.

With regard to cross-Strait relations, what are the more immediate priorities of the three principal players – the United States, Taiwan, and China? The U.S. has an upcoming election that inevitably must place a premium on short term solutions or temporary fixes. National security interests will trump economic problems. It must continue to engage itself in a difficult war on terrorism worldwide on the one hand, and cope with a war to expand democracy in the Middle East on the other.

At this time, a national debate is taking place in the U.S. that is already serious and emotional and is likely to become more so as the election draws closer. What had been seen as an easy win for President Bush is now no longer the case.

On cross-Strait relations, therefore, America's objective is peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait while it is addressing these wars elsewhere. This is likely to be the case whatever the outcome of the election. Even the most optimistic of actions in Iraq are unlikely to give America the flexibility to pursue any other objective there.

China, too, has larger priorities elsewhere. Economic growth must continue or risk social instability. To maintain that growth, China has had to accept constraints on its ability to deal vigorously with issues in the international community.

On cross-Strait matters, China's focus for the short term is to prevent Taiwan's de jure independence. Even that objective has been difficult. China has seen some of its important objectives on cross-Strait matters fail, particularly its hopes for a more congenial KMT in Taiwan, for a defeat of the DPP in the 2004 election, and even for its problems in Hong Kong.

The Taiwan government's priorities are largely domestic, but have important implications for cross-Strait relations. The most urgent is gaining a solid majority from the Legislative Yuan elections in December.

In addition to the election, reengineering the constitution and the government institutions under it, implementing the restructuring of the economy, and assuring that it will be legally necessary for the people to vote on any change to Taiwan's status will all be high on this very formidable list of priorities.

What we can see from the above is that no one wants war but all want to pursue their objectives short of that. In this regard, Taiwan has drawn much closer to overcoming its most serious problem – a consensus on national identity. Without this consensus, the ability to set national objectives will be difficult.

As for cross-Strait relations, Taiwan is unlikely to accept being pushed into a position that prevents independence and allows only a unification to which it can agree. It also will have to insist that any decision on the relationship with China will have to be the choice of the Taiwan people. Taiwan's "redlines" such as these will likely grow – and change – as its democratic system evolves.

The current sources of tension in the Taiwan Strait - the use of referendum and constitutional reform - can be clearly shown to be constructive and useful for domestic governance. They do not need to be controversial if it is clear what is being sought.

China, like Taiwan, does not want the disaster a war would bring, but it does want to move in a direction that will put Taiwan into its fold. It attempts to do so by using considerable resources and bargaining chips in influencing the international community to block Taiwan's international participation. This tactic has been very successful.

More worrisome, especially from the American standpoint, is China's military activity, including the modernization of its military forces. More obvious and therefore even more worrisome are the 500-plus missiles stationed across the Strait that are clearly meant to intimidate Taiwan. Recently, the Taiwan government made an effort to increase the people's awareness of these missiles, but the significance of more than 500 missiles aimed at Taiwan has not yet gained broad popular attention.

More recently, China has pressed the U.S. to restrain Taiwan on a number of issues. Though the U.S. Administration for the most part has been able to avoid assuming the role of mediator for the two sides, America's need for support in global issues continues to grow.

The testimony given to the House International Affairs Committee on April 21 by Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly covered a broad range of issues in the U.S.–Taiwan relationship, and stands as a new base for U.S. policy toward Taiwan. It seems to be as close to a consensus within the U.S. Government on this relationship as one could expect. It made some clear statements on American policy toward some issues, but reverted to ambiguity on others. China, Taiwan, the U.S. Congress, political liberals, and political conservatives all can find something good and something bad in it, and think tanks can fashion an infinite number of seminars from it. One can read in this statement, however, that there will be new challenges in the U.S.–Taiwan relationship and a need for the right kind of people to address them.

The testimony covered economic, military, and political issues at length. Kelly's statements for the most part were positive for Taiwan, though some of the new issues that have created tension between the three parties most involved in cross-Strait matters are not ready for clearly defined resolutions.

On political matters especially, there is considerable ambiguity. There are some issues that may inevitably lead to a much more intrusive American involvement in Taiwan's domestic affairs, though it is not yet clear that this will be the case.

For example, what does “move in the direction of independence” mean? Any democratically determined reforms that strengthen governance of Taiwan can be charged with moving in that direction simply because it makes the government more able to satisfy the people’s will. Reform of the legislature, government management, or an education system that places greater priority on a history of Taiwan all do the same. Are these “moves in the direction of independence,” therefore to be opposed?

Another question - does “no change in the status quo” give one side an advantage over the other? There is, for example, a debate in some circles that efforts by Taiwan to make unification more difficult constitutes a “move toward independence,” and therefore should be opposed. At the same time, similar efforts by China to prevent Taiwan independence, such as blocking Taiwan’s participation in the international community, are not opposed.

If this notion materialized, the U.S. could find itself with a policy that means ~~that~~ Taiwan cannot choose independence but can only choose to be a part of China when it is acceptable. This is, of course, close to the Hong Kong solution. The only choices the free people of Taiwan would have are a continuous struggle to stay separate from a communist regime or surrender to it. It is highly unlikely the U.S. would want to accept this, but the danger of moving in that direction is as possible as the still undefined creeping “move in the direction of independence.”

As the U.S. and Taiwan are clearly going to be even more involved with each other in the coming years, the U.S. will need more Taiwan experts (as opposed to China experts with a tinge of Taiwan knowledge), and Taiwan will need more American experts (with more than a tinge of Taiwan’s new politics).

Finally, some ideas that might help address one of our problems – a better way of communicating with each other.

It is unrealistic for the U.S. to use yesterday’s rules of to manage today’s cross-Strait relations, with problems that are so different from those of the past. America’s attention is focused much more on other areas of the globe, and probably will continue to be for some time. China has become an important member and active in the international community. And Taiwan has become a full fledged democracy. That calls for changes in how we communicate with each other - but as always, with caution and understanding.

One factor that should be studied goes beyond politics – it is the changes in the means of communications and how to cope with the speed with which information can have an impact on policy decisions. A statement in one country by someone who matters is known worldwide almost immediately. The meaning behind that statement often brings a reaction by other countries before it has been publicly explained. This kind of unpredictability and potential for misunderstanding can bring disaster. This is a world-wide problem, of course, but in the context of the sensitive cross-Strait relationships, it can and should be fixed.

Employing the already-existing channel of communication as a foundation for cross-Strait dialogue is by far the most appealing option. If China chooses to use it, this channel would facilitate discussions on political and economic issues and enhance China and Taiwan's ability to deal with tragedies and the inevitable problems of individuals. It would also encourage restraint on both sides, as they would want the dialogue to continue. The U.S. continues to encourage both China and Taiwan to resume dialogue, but for a variety of reasons refuses to serve as mediator.

Normal diplomatic communications already exist between the U.S. and China, and a channel for dialogue that focuses on cross-Strait issues could be established if needed. However, the U.S.'s self-inflicted restrictions on communications with counterparts in Taiwan are more complicated and should be handled by the U.S. and Taiwan. The present rules were not based on any international interpretations but were unilaterally developed by the U.S. The U.S. has already established its relationship with Taiwan as "unofficial," and a better dialogue with it would not change the status quo in any way.

Another option for improving cross-Strait communications is the use of a special envoy. Should such a channel be established, the most difficult issue for both the U.S. and Taiwan is most likely that of who talks to whom. The disadvantage of such a special envoy is that the experts in the bureaucracy are not involved. Though their time-consuming consensus gathering can be problematic, the bureaucrats are vital in preventing costly mistakes.

Still another option that might be useful is the establishment of a small cross-Strait task group in all three governments that would meet periodically or as needed. What would at first be bilateral meetings between the U.S. and China and the U.S. and Taiwan would hopefully become tripartite meetings, which could obviously help prevent misunderstanding. Of course, there are many other means of accomplishing this objective, but whatever means are used, it is both important and urgent that a regular method of discussing cross-Strait issues be developed before mistakes occur or misunderstandings develop into irreparable rifts.

In countries where national security tensions are uncommon, regular communications are sufficient. Where national security tensions are continuous as they are for cross-Strait relations, the purpose of improving communications is to resolve problems quickly before misunderstandings gel and tensions grow.