

Taiwan's 2012 Presidential Election, Evolving Sino-U.S. Relations, and the Prospect of Taiwan's Security

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Commentators have been closely watching the coming presidential election in Taiwan, oftentimes with anxiety. Many believe the electoral outcome will profoundly impact Taiwan's security prospects, primarily through its effects on cross-strait relations. The premise of most concerns is that if the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) reclaims Taiwan's presidential office, Beijing will harden its policies towards the island and at least suspend cross-strait exchanges for some period of time.

However, such a perspective overlooks the bigger structural changes that are taking place in East Asia's security environment. The Obama administration's strategic move of getting out of Iraq and Afghanistan and shifting America's foreign policy focus to the Asia-Pacific region brings new, and uncertain, dynamics into Sino-U.S. power relations. The unknown future relations between China as Taiwan's old archrival but new number one economic partner, and the United States as Taiwan's sole ally and security guarantor, makes it more difficult for any government in Taipei to steer a shrewd foreign policy. Bluntly, for either a Kuomintang (KMT) or DPP government, maintaining trust with both Beijing and Washington in a potentially more confrontational Sino-U.S. relationship will not be an easy task. Changes in this great power relationship create great uncertainty for the future of

cross-strait relations and Taiwan's security, and each party will have unique challenges in navigating these shifts.

Last week, President Obama made his initial moves that pivot Washington's strategic focus towards Asia and supposedly usher in what Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has branded "America's Pacific Century." Though some argue the physical presence of the first American president to attend the East Asia Summit itself sufficiently symbolizes Washington's new eastward strategic posture, President Obama took many steps further to substantiate U.S. policy reorientation. On the economic side, Obama pushed for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), an expansive free-trade agreement that aims at, eventually, covering the whole Asia-Pacific region. While China is not excluded from TPP, the requirement of truly embracing reciprocity and non-discrimination, i.e. forsaking currency manipulation, ceasing subsidies to state-own enterprises, and protecting intellectual property rights, means that, in the short-term, China is not going to show interest in the pact. As a result, successful negotiations of the TPP give Washington the opportunity to outline the future economic order of the Asia-Pacific region and offer China's neighbors with, in Bernard Gordon's words, an "alternative to a Pacific dominated by China". On the security side, President Obama, together with Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard, announced the establishment of a permanent marine base in Australia's Darwin, giving American forces convenient access to the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. At the same time, Secretary Clinton visited the Philippines and reaffirmed the U.S. military relationship with Manila, on the deck of a U.S. warship in Manila Bay. Amid concerns over China's assertiveness on regional territorial disputes and worries about the reliability of Americas security commitments, the Obama administration took actions to reassure regional allies and ensured the message was not missed

by any interested parties.

China's initial responses to America's eastward pivoting, summarized by Elizabeth Economy, were two-fold. One was accusing the United States of unwarrantedly interfering in regional affairs and claiming that East Asian countries were capable of solving their own disputes. The other was reminding regional countries that China would not necessarily pay any price to maintain its economic ties with regional trade partners. Beijing's message, in Economy's witty words, was blunt: we have more money, so you should be friends with us instead (or, by the way, you'll be sorry). Such implicit doubts over U.S. capabilities to sustain its regional commitments are not peculiar to Beijing. After all, amid sluggish growth, a heavily indebted economy, and scheduled defense budget cuts on a scale of hundreds of billions of dollars, Washington's ability to project power overseas is constrained in the coming years. The jury is out on whether Obama's Pacific turn is an astute re-concentration of resources on critical national interests or a last ditch measure before the American empire's eventual retrenchment. But one thing is certain: with a new military presence and economic framework both anchored on the United States and its regional allies such as Australia and Japan, it is now harder for China to believe or for Washington to convince Beijing that these actions are not about containment. Chinese leaders' suspicion of U.S. motives will grow; the mistrust between Beijing and Washington is more likely to go up, rather than down.

For Taiwan's newly elected government next year, maintaining trust with both Beijing and Washington will be challenging. Making both powers comfortable with Taiwan's alignment position may prove to be demanding. Taipei wants to prevent Washington from regarding the island as being irresistibly absorbed into China's orbit; meanwhile, Taiwan

also wants to avoid a perception by Beijing that the island is a steadfast member of a U.S. encirclement attempt. This trying foreign policy task means different things for different parties that may be in power next year.

A second Ma Ying-jeou administration will face two-fold challenges. If the KMT's Ma is re-elected, his rapprochement with China, which has greatly eliminated unwanted Sino-U.S. irritations, is likely to be welcomed in Washington. Nevertheless, Ma has to manage U.S. perceptions. If his efforts of improving cross-strait relations are taken as an indication of accepting ever closer embrace with China and disinterest in maintaining the status quo, his rapprochement policy might provide ammunition to the argument of "letting Taiwan go" in Washington. A scaled-back U.S. support would eventually reduce Taiwan's space to maneuver when it deals with China and undermine the island's interests. An equally thorny issue might come from relations with Beijing. Suspicious of U.S. containment, China is likely to become more eager to push for cross-strait political talks, in order to lock-in progress made in the current *détente* and draw Taiwan closer to its side. Given the lack of consensus in the Taiwanese society on its political relations with China, should the Ma administration proceed with cross-strait political talks, it is likely to court a domestic crisis. To avoid facing such a dilemma, the second Ma administration will face an uphill job of controlling Beijing's expectations as Taiwan carries on its reconciliation with China.

A new DPP government will face related, but distinct, challenges. If DPP's Tsai Ying-wen sticks with her denial of the so-called "1992 consensus (i.e. both China and Taiwan recognize there is only one China, but each side is allowed to interpret this notion of "one China" as they see fit)," cross-strait rapprochement is likely to stall and exchanges be sus-

pended at least in the short term. The Tsai administration needs to come up with its own discourse of the cross-strait political relations. However, to build up an alternative DPP position that can satisfy the party's Sinophobic constituencies and at the same time assure Beijing that Taipei is not the vanguard of Sinophobia is difficult. If the Tsai administration fails to stabilize cross-strait relations, it is problematic how Taipei can persuade Washington the island is a strategic asset, not liability, in the Sino-U.S. relationship. After all, the current Sino-U.S. relations remain dominated by a mix of cooperation with competition, and Washington still looks to Beijing for collaboration despite their heightened mutual suspicion. Taiwan's security environment could be worse if cross-strait relations revert to confrontations seen during the previous DPP administration of Chen Shui-bian. Beijing will stop flowing benefits to the island. Equally damaging is that antagonized cross-strait relations increase America's costs of supporting Taiwan. Some in Washington will move the island down the priority list of support, because supporting Taipei is costly, and since without alternative benefactors, Taipei has little leverage to attract America's scarce political and diplomatic capital. Higher costs of supporting Taiwan may also add fuel to the "abandoning Taiwan" argument, which has contended that the costs of maintaining America's commitments to Taiwan have outweighed the benefits.

In sum, the East Asian strategic landscape is in a state of flux. President Obama is pivoting the focus of U.S. foreign policy towards Asia; and America's Pacific turn has heightened Beijing's suspicion of Washington's motives. Recent U.S. actions have increased uncertainties in the Sino-U.S. relations and made it more difficult for Taiwan to position itself between the two powers, no matter which government takes office in Taipei next year. Nevertheless, in the short-run, the general atmosphere in the Sino-U.S. relations remains a mixture of

cooperation and competition. As a result, Taiwan has space to maneuver, and maintaining accesses to both Beijing and Washington is still the most beneficial foreign policy position that Taiwan should strive to take. Because China remains the biggest security threat to Taiwan, Taipei's new government should aim at cementing U.S. commitments to Taiwan while at least maintaining a working relationship with China. Specifically, Taiwan needs to reduce Washington's costs of supporting the island, and this first and foremost means preventing the cross-strait relations from reverting to outright confrontation. Last but not least, Taipei should build up as effective as possible communication channels with both Beijing and Washington. Effective communication channels will help Taipei preempt or deal with mistrust with either power and will prove to be instrumental in steering a prudent foreign policy.