

If Taiwan Chooses Unification, Should the United States Care?

If Taiwan chooses unification with China, are U.S. interests jeopardized? Until now, U.S. policy has assumed that unification would occur only through forcible action on Beijing's part. U.S. officials, not anticipating a day when peaceful negotiations could bridge the huge gulf between the two parties, have not planned for that possibility. Confronted with the danger that cross-strait antagonism could burst into war, U.S. diplomats, statesmen, and scholars have been the loudest and most consistent supporters of dialogue across the Taiwan Strait, asserting that, as long as the process is peaceful, Washington is indifferent to the outcome.

Yet, conditions across the strait have been changing. A growing tide of Taiwan investment in China has raised questions about its political consequences, suggesting that some version of unification actually could materialize—not immediately, but not too far off either. For Washington, this development would mean an entirely new array of economic, political, and strategic forces in East Asia, as Taiwan and China, as well as Japan, adjust to a different reality. The agnosticism of U.S. policy has been in large part a result of not examining a future that appeared infinitely remote. Now that circumstances are changing, can Washington's detachment be sustained? Should it?

What Has Changed in Taiwan

Developments in Taiwan during the last decade have produced radically contradictory impulses that are pulling Taiwan and China apart at the same time as they are being drawn irresistibly together. How this dilemma will be

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The Washington Quarterly • 25:3 pp. 15–28.

resolved—whether through the prolongation of an uneasy and fluid status quo, a creative compromise, or capitulation to one set of priorities—worries those with interests in the island’s future.

The surging level of Taiwan investment in China is the single most compelling sign that unification might occur without war. This “mainland fever” threatens to drain the island of capital and jobs while making Taiwan’s prosperity contingent on the political relationship between Beijing and Taipei.

As Taiwan businesspeople become increasingly committed to their mainland operations, they exert pressure on Taiwan’s government to facilitate their ventures. This means calls for loosening financial restrictions; expediting the three links of direct transportation, communication, and trade; or even agitating for unification with China on China’s terms.

The economic ties between China and Taiwan have been strengthening for more than a decade, but recently have multiplied and deepened. According to Taiwan’s Ministry of Economic Affairs, more than three-quarters of Taiwan’s companies have an investment on the mainland, reaching some \$60 billion in more than 50,000 ventures. Taiwan increasingly exploits mainland factories to supply both China’s domestic market and Taiwan’s international customers.¹

Beijing hopes the lure of China’s great economic expansion will be an irresistible magnet for repossessing Taiwan. One exuberant mainland official interviewed in early 2002 declared, “Our economy is our best weapon. We won’t attack them. We will buy them. It’s very Chinese.”² Indeed, in 2001, with the U.S. economy weak, Japan mired in long-term stagnation, and only modest domestic reform, Taiwan’s economy contracted for the first time in 50 years. Yet, even as the United States and the world recover from recession, opportunities in China will remain enticing.

In fact, Taiwan president Chen Shui-bian’s administration convened an Economic Development Advisory Council in late August 2001 to propose ways to reinvigorate internal development and exploit cross-strait contacts. Chen also jettisoned the “go slow, be patient” policy designed to limit Taiwan’s exposure to China and avoid strengthening the enemy. Beginning last November, businesses have been urged to pursue “active opening, effective management” across the strait, even if the result is taking more money and jobs to the mainland. Tsai Ing-wen, chairwoman of the Mainland Affairs Council, observed, “Mainland investment should be an integral part of our global expansion plan.” This approach requires Taiwan to keep ahead of

China’s model of ‘one country, two systems’ does not provide a viable roadmap.

China on the technology ladder and to utilize this competition to force rapid modernization of Taiwan's financial institutions, service sector, and research-based industries.³

Entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) promises to intensify cross-strait economic integration. Participation in the WTO will create incentives to maximize the speed and ease of transportation and communication, renewing pressure for use of the three links despite Taiwan's security concerns and Beijing's insistence on a "one China" pledge. WTO rules will also reduce trade and investment barriers and force greater bilateral interaction even if Beijing resists using multilateral dispute resolution mechanisms. At the same time, Taipei will have fewer ways to guard against Chinese initiatives that, although economic in substance, may have broad political purposes. Already Beijing has begun to push a Chinese Free Trade Area incorporating China, Hong Kong, and Macao. It seeks to add Taiwan by 2005.⁴ Moreover, Taiwan businesspeople will leap into new commitments on the mainland regardless of security implications.

Vigorous economic exchange has not only added to prosperity in Taiwan and China, it has also perhaps most remarkably led large numbers of Taiwan merchants and manufacturers to live on the mainland. Taiwan residents of enclaves in Shanghai and elsewhere surround themselves with Taiwan culture and food but live in China in far greater luxury than they could afford at home. Although political restrictions such as schoolbook censorship are increasing, enthusiasm for opportunities on the mainland remains strong. Not surprisingly, China sees these enterprising people as the vanguard of unification.

Simultaneously, other trends less favorable for unification have also been accelerating. After more than a decade of political and social transformation, the Taiwan public increasingly perceives itself as something other than simply Chinese. Beijing originally denied the potency of a political and cultural divide across the strait, insisting that all Taiwanese were Chinese and that that basic makeup could not be altered. Yet, the growth in prosperity, democracy, and opportunity on the island brought greater numbers of Taiwanese into the political system. Gradually, Taiwan history and geography invaded school curricula. Use of the Taiwanese language captured the public, particularly the political, arena. On the island, as on the mainland, shifts in attitudes, generations, and historical circumstances created a new Taiwan nationalism—a potent force for local unity based on a Taiwan identity.

Acceleration of this trend alarmed and angered Beijing. Thus in 2000, in a notorious effort to quicken the pace of unification—lest Taiwan's Chinese roots become too attenuated—Beijing issued a White Paper. Timed for the eve of a Taiwan presidential election, the document warned that delay, as

much as a declaration of independence, could mean war. China aroused an angry backlash and failed to make rapid unification more imaginable.

Once celebrated equally on both sides of the strait, the idea of one China no longer commands unquestioned agreement in Taiwan. Presently, the vast majority of the people prefer an open-ended status quo. Whether the public might find some formula for union with the mainland palatable neither Beijing, Washington, nor Taipei knows. China's model of "one country, two systems," however, clearly does not provide a viable roadmap.

Thus, Taiwan today is caught in a contradiction between its economic and political priorities. Economic dependence on and integration with China—the changing perceptions of the island's needs and interests—may make unification desirable or at least necessary for Taiwan. Future prosperity on the island clearly appears linked to the mainland. Whether effective exploitation of the China market demands that Taiwan be a part of China is unclear. Moreover, as integration progresses, disrupting ties that bind mainland businesses to Taiwan in order to serve political goals becomes more difficult for Beijing. Finally, the Taiwan settlers in China seem to symbolize the future of relations across the strait, but their significance may be more complex than their numbers suggest. If they are largely mainlander in background or pro-mainland in their political sympathies, then their choice to live in China is not so startling, and by doing so they further reduce the declining population in Taiwan of Taiwanese eager for unification.

What Has Changed in China

This country has spent the last decade expanding economically and transforming militarily, raising the stakes for good Sino-U.S. relations by enhancing Beijing's power and influence, while sharpening the focus on Taiwan as a source of tension between Washington and Beijing. The recovery by the People's Republic of China (PRC) of Hong Kong in 1997 and Macao in 1999 symbolized triumph over centuries of Western imperialism. It also reaffirmed the belief of China's leaders that they should be able to retrieve Taiwan and eliminate its challenge to the central government's legitimacy by applying Deng Xiaoping's "one country, two systems" formula.

Beijing unsurprisingly sees evidence everywhere that Washington has been maneuvering to keep Taiwan separate from the PRC, regardless of the integrative forces of trade and investment or the views of the Chinese people living on the mainland and in Taiwan. Among the most obvious hallmarks of this U.S. policy, many Chinese critics charge, is Washington's escalation in military support for Taiwan—a concrete manifestation of the foolhardy U.S. policy that will lead to armed confrontation with Beijing.

Beijing firmly believes that U.S. maneuvering for the division of Taiwan from China began during the Chinese civil war and has rarely been interrupted since then. Concessions on Taiwan by President Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger in 1971 raised Chinese hopes that, with China's formal recognition, Taipei would be isolated and collapse. It did not, and Beijing has blamed the United States. Whether through arms sales or democratization, Washington has allegedly given Taiwan the tools to prevent unification.

In recent years, China's economic boom has given Beijing the resources to sharpen both its seductive and coercive strategies for recovering the island. Burgeoning economic integration between China and Taiwan raised Beijing's optimism that it will not be necessary to use force to compel unification. Chinese officials have offered special access, tax incentives, and other inducements for Taiwan businesspeople. As with Hong Kong, Taiwan industrialists and financial moguls have been promised privilege and political power in a Greater China.

More immediately, Beijing has sought to aggravate and utilize Taiwan's economic and political weakness. Since Chen's election to the Taiwan presidency in 2000, Beijing has followed a cautious approach. Dispensing with incendiary polemics, it has largely ignored Chen and sought to split the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), utilizing a united front strategy, courting prominent figures from the opposition, and generally encouraging obstructionism to prevent Chen from being reelected in 2004.

Beijing also has moderated its position rhetorically, presenting increasingly reasonable terms for dialogue and compromise. Qian Qichen, China's vice premier, reformulated Beijing's one China policy and came to the United States in early 2001 to deliver the message personally to President George W. Bush's new administration. As a Chinese official who handles Taiwan affairs noted, "Once we said we would liberate Taiwan, then we said Taiwan was just a province of China, now we are saying Taiwan can be our equal. For the mainland to make these kinds of adjustments in policy is not an easy thing."⁵ In the end, Beijing hopes to demonstrate that the only way Taiwan can remain prosperous, stable, and at peace is as part of China.

Of course, a coercive arm of Beijing's strategy remains as well, which although less innovative and of far longer standing, has taken on a new dimension because of China's rising prosperity. Indeed, Chinese leaders long postponed military modernization, recognizing that the country needed many fundamental improvements before it began to dedicate resources to weapons

Would unification without war solve or exacerbate the U.S. security dilemma in Asia?

acquisition. Beginning in the early 1990s, however, China's military spending began to rise meaningfully.

Beijing has focused on amassing the strength to prevail in a Taiwan recovery scenario. This effort has not involved assembling a huge armada, but rather developing and deploying capabilities that would allow China to overcome Taiwan's defenses without an invasion and to fend off U.S. intervention. Central to this plan has been the anticipated use of short- and medium-range ballistic missiles placed along China's coast opposite Taiwan for purposes of intimidation and, if necessary, to destroy airfields, electric power grids, and industrial plants, as well as to terrorize the population. In 1995 and 1996, Beijing demonstrated its willingness to use these missiles, firing several toward Taiwan to punish then-President Lee Teng-hui for traveling to the United States and to threaten Taiwan's citizens while aiming to weaken Lee politically in the process.

To China's surprise, an often-indecisive President Bill Clinton sent two aircraft carrier battle groups to the vicinity. Although U.S. ships did not directly intrude, the message proved clear and perhaps stronger than intended. Since then, Beijing has believed that Washington, regardless of its unwillingness to make a firm rhetorical commitment, intends to use its superior military forces to defend Taiwan. As a result, Beijing has accelerated its missile buildup to overwhelm Taiwan and to force its surrender before the United States can interfere.

Beijing understands that, if it uses force to compel unification, its hope for "constructive and cooperative" relations with Washington, as Presidents Jiang Zemin and Bush characterized them in Shanghai in 2001, will have been shattered.⁶ Beijing is prepared to make this sacrifice, however, and may believe it is unavoidable. To China's leadership, the trend lines leading Washington to a more aggressive policy of separating Taiwan from the PRC have long been clear. U.S. actions to block "liberation" would confirm China's forebodings about Washington's views and not come as an unanticipated shock.

Implications

Today, the strategic imperative of not going to war with China remains paramount for the United States, but the correct path for doing so does not appear identical to everyone in Washington. The question is not simply how dangerous China is to the United States militarily but how much of a threat it poses in the specific context of cross-strait relations and, more critically, how broadly the concept of security should be defined when thinking about the triangular relationship among the United States, Taiwan, and China. The problem under consideration here, however, is not whether China has

the capacity to invade Taiwan, not whether Taiwan would fight or surrender, not even whether the United States would intervene. The issue is, if Taiwan opted for unification with China without war, would this solve or exacerbate the U.S. security dilemma in Asia.

Although some analysts in the Pentagon and the think-tank community expended considerable energy in the 1990s warning about the danger of a rising China, they remain a minority. The China threat continues to be a potential peril, not a current hazard. A strong and assertive China, even if democratic, would complicate Washington's diplomatic and security calculations, impinging on its position and alliances in East Asia. A strong China not friendly to the United States poses a more serious long-term problem.

The alleged threat advanced by the "rise" of China grows out of China's anti-Americanism and yearning for regional hegemony. As a hungry, non-status quo power, China could seek to circumscribe U.S. influence in Asia, displace U.S. forces, and seduce or coerce U.S. allies. Anxious to break free of a de facto military encirclement established during the Cold War, China seeks to build a stronger, modern military and develop asymmetrical warfare technologies, occasionally evading bilateral proliferation agreements and international control regimes. Some in the United States who fear China characterize themselves as the "Blue Team" to differentiate themselves from a "Red Team" of alleged "panda huggers" who, they say, dominate government and the community of U.S.-China specialists. Concern about a future security challenge involving China, however, does not require enlisting in a team of any color. A more powerful China will inevitably be more assertive about its interests regardless of whether they are compatible with those of the United States.

In practical terms, concern about a future threat from China encompasses the strategic advantages that unification with Taiwan would bring to Beijing. Probably more significant than any other factor, by eliminating China's needs to build toward a hostile takeover of Taiwan, to protect itself from Taiwan, and to plan for a potential conflict with the United States over Taiwan, unification could release a significant percentage of China's resources. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) would be free to change its priorities, re-deploy its forces, and reconceptualize its strategic objectives. For Washington, this change means a less predictable, more flexible, and potentially less-burdened opponent, though one still noted for its lack of transparency.

Unification could lead to a more significant projection of Chinese naval and air power.

Enhancing Beijing's maritime security would probably alarm Japanese military planners.

Beijing's recovery of Taiwan could in fact lead to a more significant projection of Chinese naval and air power beyond coastal waters. With the continuing need to manage a maritime frontier that includes disputed interests in the South China Sea, China might be tempted to contest the U.S. military presence in the region and strive for greater force-projection capabilities. Although China has pledged that Taiwan under "one country, two systems" will retain its own autonomous military and that the PLA will not station units on the island, no absolute guarantees are protecting crucial sea lanes carrying

oil and other sensitive goods past Taiwan. Commercial channels from the South China Sea do not generally pass through the Taiwan Strait but do parallel the east coast of Taiwan, coming as close as 75 nautical miles, as ships travel north toward Japan, Korea, and Russia. These transportation routes would be more vulnerable to interruption by China if Taiwan were under Beijing's control.⁷

Indeed, China has at times been less than scrupulous about respecting international waters. Angered by Canberra's support for Washington in the EP-3 spy plane crisis in 2001, China harassed an Australian naval flotilla, claiming it had intruded into Chinese waters as it sailed through the Taiwan Strait, even though the strait is an international waterway under the United Nations Law of the Sea Convention.⁸ As former U.S. ambassador to China James R. Lilley has noted, Taiwan "is the cork in China's bottle." China's reclamation of Taiwan would "end what China feels to be a blockade on its abilities to control its surrounding seas." With Taiwan in mainland hands, Lilley observes, Beijing could diminish the potential vulnerability it feels because "as much as 50 percent of China's economy depends on foreign trade, about 90 percent of which is transported by ship."⁹

In addition, the enhancement of Beijing's maritime security would almost certainly alarm Japanese military planners. A Chinese presence along Japan's shipping routes and abutting its Ryukyu island chain would risk giving Beijing an opportunity to "strangle the world's second-largest economy."¹⁰ Further, China would gain greater proximity to disputed oil and natural gas fields in the Senkaku/Diaoyutai area. During the 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, when Tokyo and Washington were revising their defense agreements to clarify mutual obligations, China's aggressive use of missiles led the normally cautious Japanese to agree to a tougher set of commitments than first intended. Tokyo sought to make clear to Beijing that neither intimidating Taiwan nor disturbing the peace in areas around Japan was acceptable.

If Taiwan was unified with China, the geostrategic impact could be significant for Sino-Japanese relations and the U.S. role in Japan as well. The resolution of this dangerous stalemate might relieve Tokyo's fears about Beijing because China's irredentist claims would have been satisfied. Japan might accordingly be less tolerant of U.S. bases on its soil. Unification could also leave Japan apprehensive, however, and even more determined to revise its constitution, expand its military, and preserve its U.S. alliance.

The U.S. strategic loss in the intelligence arena would amplify any security breach caused by unification. Although Washington discontinued sabotage operations in China and ceased using Taiwan as a base for aerial reconnaissance when it recognized the PRC, this self-denial did not cover other collection programs it conducts from Taiwan. Surrendering extensive listening posts and ending cooperation in evaluating human intelligence would handicap U.S. information gathering and defense efforts.

Economic integration and unification may also have an impact on the transfer of dual use and military technology to Taiwan. As manufacturers move civilian industrial production to the mainland and Taiwan's economic dependence on China grows, suspicions have arisen that confidential proprietary information has begun to leak. If this is true and were to encompass sophisticated U.S. arms sold to Taiwan, it could be dangerous to us. Some journalists and members of Congress have called for protecting this equipment either by ending sales or disabling weapons already sold. Critics could use massive past transfers as a pretext to block unification. Beijing has declared that its "one country, two systems" framework would mean, as in Hong Kong, that no transfers of equipment or technology would occur. Once Taiwan has been recovered, however, incentives for Beijing to honor such pledges might vanish.

Since Bush became president, the clearest indicator of the strategic worldview of an influential portion of his administration has been the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) assembled by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. The QDR has indirectly emphasized the potential danger of a rising China and the importance of critical friends and allies in Northeast and littoral East Asia, which includes Taiwan. Examining the QDR view of U.S. national interests, Rear Adm. Michael A. McDevitt (Ret.) of the Center for Naval Analysis asserted that, although the QDR does not say so explicitly, "[t]his translates into a call for a ... capability that is able to defeat China's short- and medium-range ballistic missile force, ... deal with China's large submarine force, ... maintain air superiority over the maritime approaches to Japan and Taiwan, and ... strengthen deterrence across the Taiwan Strait by being able to hold at-risk targets of importance in China."¹¹ The events of September 11 in many ways have altered U.S. threat perceptions, but they have not lessened the Pentagon's

concern about Beijing's avowed policy to use force if it tires of waiting for Taiwan to begin discussions leading to unification.

Manifestly, if China ultimately intends to drive the United States out of the western Pacific rather than coexist with it, then anything that helps China grow stronger, including unification with Taiwan, would not be in U.S. interests. Although one can find voices calling for China to act preemptively, concluding that this action is Beijing's goal would be premature today. Taiwan's contribution to a China that actually had become a "strategic competitor" would be as much economic and technological as military. The Chinese Free Trade Area just approved by Beijing is envisioned, once it incorporates Taiwan, to create the fourth-largest economic entity in the world after the United States, Japan, and Germany. Taiwan as part of China might hope to moderate China's values and institutions, but it could also strengthen a China whose values had not changed.

Yet, despite the potentially negative implications of peaceful unification, one benefit is overriding. The eradication of this flashpoint would instantly and overwhelmingly reduce friction and the risk of accidental clashes between Washington and Beijing. Unification would unquestionably affect some U.S. interests adversely, but not nearly as much as would war between China and the United States.

Options for Obstructing Unification

Should Taiwan decide to pursue unification with China, the United States has few viable options to prevent it. Although Beijing argues that Washington has manipulated Taipei for decades to block unification, considering the inevitable disputes within the U.S. government and among Americans generally over whether unification would be in the U.S. national interest, the United States would have difficulty arriving at a coherent policy on the issue.

Beijing pinpoints two policies as crucial to Taiwan's disinterest in unification. It argues in the 2000 Defense White Paper and elsewhere that Washington has utilized sales of advanced weapons to Taiwan explicitly to prevent unification. Far from giving Taipei the courage to negotiate with Beijing, as the United States maintains, Beijing believes that these sales have reduced any incentive for Taiwan to compromise or even to talk.

Similarly, Beijing has denounced the democratization of Taiwan and the U.S. role in that process as a scheme to delay unification. China's Communist leaders have never believed that the people of Taiwan would voluntarily separate themselves from China and follow a different road. Only a self-interested cabal led by someone such as Chen or Lee could ignore China's great strides since 1949 and move in a separatist direction.

Contrary to Beijing's assumptions, however, neither democratization nor arms sales would be effective tools to stop peaceful unification. Arms sales have been important as Taiwan has sought to preserve its autonomy under threat of attack from China. If Taiwan seeks unification willingly and trusts China to negotiate a mutually beneficial association, then Taipei would have no further need for arms purchases, and Washington would have no leverage. Beijing has more or less acknowledged the point by suggesting it would accept U.S. arms sales after unification because those weapons would no longer be aimed at China. Thus, if Taiwan wanted to seek unification, a threat to end arms sales would not stop it.

Democratization has been a barrier to unification only because the people of Taiwan have not been persuaded that abandoning autonomy is in their interests. Should public opinion in Taiwan shift to favor unification and Taiwan's democratically elected officials declare that the time has come for union, Washington would be in no position to contradict them. Doing so would risk the enmity of the island's people and threaten to undermine the very institutions Washington seeks to defend. In the 1990s, Richard Bush, chairman of the board and director of the American Institute in Taiwan, repeatedly asserted Washington's respect for the public's judgment of what would comprise a viable cross-strait solution. In February 2001, former president Clinton called for the "assent" of the people of Taiwan to any settlement. Rather than using democracy to prevent unification, the United States has made clear that it will accept the freely stated will of the people.

One benefit is overriding: eliminating Taiwan as a flashpoint.

Time to Plan for All Contingencies

No one can keep economic integration from rushing forward and dismantling geographic and man-made barriers to the creation of an open economic zone called Greater China. For the moment, economic integration has brought a degree of quiet to the strait, encouraging China's leaders to relax and trust the power of money to accomplish what military force and political wiles have been unable to achieve.

Unification is not imminent or inevitable. Chen and the DPP will certainly not renounce their independence aspirations, and the people of Taiwan have clearly indicated their preference to maintain some form of the status quo into the indefinite future. Meanwhile, conditions for Taiwan businesspeople on the mainland—where Communist Party cells have been

placed in Taiwan enterprises and Taiwan firms judged supportive of independence have been intimidated—serve as reminders that unification would severely test the resilience of Taiwan’s system and its people.

Nevertheless, U.S. officials must think about Taiwan’s future in terms unlike those that have framed the issue for the last five decades. Washington must consider peaceful unification of Taiwan with China as a possibility and examine what that would mean for U.S. national interests and the stability of East Asia from its own perspective; it must also consider in practical terms what, if anything, the United States could do to stop this eventuality, if it wished.

The U.S. has few viable options to prevent unification, should Taiwan decide to pursue it.

If the United States tried to prevent peaceful unification based on an assumption that unification would not be in the U.S. interest or that Taiwan’s actions were involuntary, the United States would face an immediate risk of war and the certainty of international opprobrium. The global community would view protests from Washington that Taipei had been coerced or had sold out—a victim of greedy business interests colluding with mainlanders to trample

on the popular will—with great skepticism. Whereas many countries have cultivated economic relations with Taiwan, they have minimal political ties and no contractual or traditional security role. Under the duress of a crisis, they would be unlikely to interfere in a complex political confrontation.

In Taiwan, despite growing integration with and dependence on China, the public appears to believe it can foster a mutually profitable business environment without political entanglement. If the balance shifts, however, and reconciliation proves possible without capitulation to Beijing’s demands, including some truly equal power-sharing arrangement, peace could trump the perpetual stress of the status quo. Any prediction is difficult. The public would have to be persuaded to trust the officials who represent them, and the terms would have to be utterly transparent. U.S. opposition to a popular arrangement would come as a shock, alienating the island from its erstwhile patron and jeopardizing future relations.

Finally, would the American people tolerate any interference? A common belief is that, in the event of an unprovoked attack by China, Congress, supported by the public, would favor defending Taiwan. Although some analysts are skeptical, appeals to defend democratic states against aggressors have succeeded in the past. Yet, if confronted with a peaceful solution to a distant and little-understood problem, even one involving unification with a communist

state, Americans would most likely opt for peace. A “Who lost Taiwan?” debate reminiscent of the partisan mudslinging surrounding China’s fall in 1949 might animate Congress, but its impact on the public is far less certain.

Paradoxically, the U.S. government has been the party most often wanting to see dialogue across the strait. Washington has pushed, sometimes insistently, for negotiation even when neither Beijing nor Taipei wanted to talk. Most recently, that impulse has subsided as the Bush administration has publicly sympathized with the idea that talks, if they happen, should be completely flexible. Thus, Washington has firmly supported Taipei’s position that the one China principle must not be a precondition to dialogue.¹²

Ultimately, this policy reflects U.S. national interests at stake in the confrontation across the Taiwan Strait, the most important being peace and freedom. The United States rightly remains opposed to the use of force to unify China. So long as unification can only be achieved through coercion, Washington should and will prevent the success of an unprovoked attack. Further, Washington’s commitment to Taiwan’s democracy means respect for the choices made by Taiwan’s people. They have so far sought nothing more than affirmation of their political autonomy, even in the face of rapid economic integration with mainland China. The U.S. abandonment of agnosticism to dictate an answer, whether unification or independence, would be a great betrayal as well as a dangerous gamble after all these decades of stalemate, struggle, risk, and reform. The United States has much at stake in the Taiwan Strait. Washington would not serve its strategic interests, secure the goodwill of Taiwan’s people, or win the hearts and minds of the mainland Chinese by trying to impose a solution to the Taiwan Strait dilemma.

Notes

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