

## THE SIGUR CENTER FOR ASIAN STUDIES ASIA REPORT

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### U.S. POLICY DIRECTIONS ON TAIWAN

In an era of improving Taiwan-China relations, the question of the importance of the United States' relationship with Taiwan is open to discussion. With deepening economic ties and improving political relations with China under the Ma Ying-jeou administration, is the United States still important to Taiwan? The answer provided by the panelists at the October 28th roundtable was a definitive "yes." The United States, according to the panel, is still vitally important for Taiwan's continued security. Though each speaker highlighted different aspects of the U.S.-Taiwan relationship, each emphasized the role the U.S. plays for Taiwan. For the panelists, potential U.S. policy directions include continued U.S. commitment, both in security and economics, which they argued is important to Taiwan's future stability and to its ability to continue improving relations with China.

Bernard Cole of the National War College spoke primarily on the security situation in the Taiwan Strait, and how improving technologies and capacities are changing the strategic picture. "Simple geography," he argues, provides a frame for any potential conflict over the island, where Chinese submarine and missile capacity could be used to deny U.S. aircraft carrier groups access to the Strait. This could "deter or delay U.S. entry into any sort of scenario involving Taiwan and the mainland," Cole states. China has an increasing capacity for multiple methods of naval warfare includ-

ing air, amphibious, mine, and anti-ship ballistic missiles, all of which contribute to their potential threat in the Strait.

From Taiwan's view, the biggest problem concerning the Chinese military has to do with the way that it has been modernizing its personnel. It enables the Chinese to use increasingly sophisticated technologies, such as ballistic missiles, that require trained operators. To respond to this development, Cole notes that Taiwan has also been improving its personnel and making the island-wide defense structure more coherent despite the lack of new U.S. technical imports. However, he argues that the conscript-based system still needs to be replaced with an all volunteer military as is scheduled to happen by 2014.

Changes in force distribution within the U.S. have also affected the security situation in the Strait. The U.S. Navy grows smaller every year and although it is highly technologically advanced, each ship can only be in one place at a time. The Taiwanese military recognizes that the U.S. has multiple priorities that may differ from their own, thus making U.S. commitment to direct defense potentially variable. The next year will be decisive for the Obama administration to make decisions regarding the sale of arms to Taiwan.

Alan Romberg of the Stimson Center highlighted American attitudes toward the Taiwan Strait in the context of the current

#### ROUNDTABLE October 28, 2009

**Bernard Cole**, Professor of International History, National War College

**Alan Romberg**, Distinguished Fellow and Director, East Asia Program, Henry L. Stimson Center

**Nancy Bernkopf Tucker**, Professor of History, Georgetown University and the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service

*Moderated by:*

**Edward McCord**, Associate Professor of History and International Affairs, The George Washington University

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situation. The United States ultimately supports the legitimate aspirations for prosperity and security on both sides of the Strait. This means that the U.S.'s long-standing opposition to unilateral efforts by either side to change the status quo will continue. The U.S. has an essential role in assisting the peaceful development of cross-Strait relations by preventing either side from forcing its position on the other.

Romberg also points out that China-Taiwan relations are becoming more institutionalized. Beijing has adopted measures to help Taiwan's economy and improve the reception of Ma Ying-jeou's policies. "There are many ways of thinking about unification and the extended timeline that Beijing now provides for mutual interaction can help shape both sides' thinking about definitions of such terms as unification, or one China, or even sovereignty," Romberg stated.

The flexibility provided by this approach allows Taiwan to have a role in the process of expanding trade and reducing tensions without ceding control and sovereignty. The success or failure of the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) that is still under negotiation will be a test of how well this policy can work, and there will be a battle within Taiwan between the Democratic Progressive Party and the Kuomintang on these negotiations. The PRC has shown sensitivity to Taiwan's position, and made reciprocity an increasingly evident theme in the official commentary about all aspects of cross-Strait relations. Without a political underpinning, however, the cross-Strait relationship is susceptible to disruption, as seen during the Chen Shui-bian era. According to Romberg, President Obama supports the current framework for improved cross-Strait relations, and has since his 2008 campaign.

The logic for an ongoing U.S. role is clear. As Romberg explains, "A strong Taiwan will be less susceptible to coercion or intimidation and better able to engage the PRC with confidence." Arms sales and other forms of U.S. support give Ma Ying-jeou the credibility to pursue further cross-Strait ties, and this stabilizes cross-Strait affairs, regional security, and economic development. However, for Beijing, the significance of U.S. arms sales to Taiwan is "not their military utility but what they symbolize in terms of American involvement in what Beijing sees as a quintessentially internal matter." China also sees U.S. arms sales as a strategic reaction to China's growing power and influence. These are funda-

mental issues for China, and will continue to impact the relationships between the three governments.

Nancy Tucker of Georgetown described Taiwan's relationship with the United States as characterized by "dependence and distrust," because the U.S. and Taiwan have very different priorities. The United States is relieved that the improvement in cross-Strait relations allow it to pay less attention to cross-Strait issues, but Taiwan still desires "significant, continuous, and overt displays of U.S. support." This contradiction is typically seen as the current source of Taiwan-U.S. distrust. However, Tucker argues that the warming trend in cross-Strait relations makes U.S. support even more impor-



tant to Taiwan because it enables Taiwan to continue improving that cross-Strait relationship.

In Tucker's view, cross-Strait developments, U.S.-Taiwan and U.S.-China relations, and Taiwan's internal politics are the four major areas of interactions that drive the debate on security and economic issues. U.S. support is critical to Taiwan regardless of whether cross-Strait relations are positive or negative, due to the confidence generated in Taiwan by continued support and the security benefits of deterring Chinese aggression.

Chinese missile deployment is one of the unpredictable complexities in cross-Strait relations because of its direct impact on Taiwan's security, and it is an example of one issue that relates to all three bilateral relationships. China has made missile redeployment contingent on a peace agreement, and Taiwan has made a peace agreement contingent on missile redeployment. The problem is that Beijing can always move the missiles back even if it redeploys them to gain concessions from Taiwan; consequently U.S. security support remains vital. President Obama has clearly resolved to avoid disputes with Beijing, and this concerns

Taiwan just as much as if Sino-U.S. relations soured and created a more dangerous climate for the region.

Additionally, Taiwan's contentious internal politics have impeded the development of an adequate security posture. In a reversal of previous conditions, some KMT members now question the need for more spending on defense when cross-Strait relations have improved, and DPP members have begun to favor more defense spending as a way to improve Taiwan's negotiating position with China. U.S.-Taiwan relations also influence cross-Strait relations. Some in Taiwan worry that the U.S. is unhappy with improvements in cross-Strait relations, and others worry that the U.S. is too happy with the warming relations and will use this trend as an excuse to reduce military support for Taiwan.

Taiwan is particularly concerned about two concrete issues: the U.S. may cut off arms sales, and the prospect of Taiwan becoming increasingly economically isolated in Asia. Both of these issues and other areas of U.S.-Taiwan relations are highly complex for the U.S. because they complicate U.S.-China relations. In order to resolve these issues Tucker asks: "Is it time for

the foundational policies towards U.S.-Taiwan relations to change, especially strategic ambiguity and the six assurances?" War in the Taiwan Strait, she argues, is more likely to come about due to miscalculation or accident than it is to be the result of overt action by any party involved. She hopes that strategic clarity could be a replacement for the existing policy, which by its very nature, provokes distrust.

All three roundtable participants highlighted the importance of U.S.-Taiwan relations to Taiwan's security. They also emphasized that it is only with close ties to the U.S. that Taiwan can successfully improve relations with China. The U.S., on the other hand, must balance its relationship with Taiwan with the need for good ties to China, creating a delicate, three-sided relationship that the Obama administration must maintain. The majority of panelists argued for the continuation of the status-quo, while Tucker discussed the need for a reevaluation of the bedrock principles of the U.S.-Taiwan relationship. Whichever option Obama chooses, U.S. policy directions are still of vital interest to Taiwan.



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