



**Sigur Center  
for Asian Studies**

**THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY**

## **Taking Stock of Cross – Strait Relations: Chinese Postures and Taiwan’s Prospects**

China recently has ramped up its bilateral pressure on Taiwan. This has coincided with a rise in uncertainty of American commitment to the island. The United States Department of State’s removal of the Taiwanese flag from its website has further alarmed Taiwanese as they look to counter growing Chinese influence. With a backdrop of uncertainty for a longstanding U.S. partner, the [Sigur Center for Asian Studies convened a Roundtable of experts to discuss political and strategic trends pertaining to the dynamics of Taiwan-China-U.S. relations.](#)

Mark Stokes of the Project 2049 Institute headed the Roundtable by explaining Chinese strategic pressure on Taiwan. This pressure involves both political and military coercion that seeks to change the status quo in favor of Chinese mainland interests that presents Taiwan as a “rogue” territory of China. But Stokes asserts that what China hopes to achieve is contrary to the objective reality. Given that legitimate governments exist on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, the United States has an interest in balancing legitimacy between the two sides, Stokes argued.

According to Stokes, China sees the issue of Taiwan as a zero-sum game and aims to establish that Beijing is the sole representative. Therefore, China vies to delegitimize Taiwan’s sovereign government and place Taiwan within Beijing’s own broader geostrategic outlook for the region.

Taiwan's independent democracy also irks China, fearing that a robust democracy so close to its borders could have a spillover effect on the mainland. Stokes explains that there are a number of Chinese political groups working to push the narrative of one country, two systems. China also works to damage Taiwan's relations with other nations by blocking their admittance to multinational organizations, including the United Nations.

To counteract these measures, Stokes argues that the United States should develop a more normal relationship with both sides, while still honoring the One China Framework. By developing a more normal relationship with both China and Taiwan, the U.S. would work within the objective reality of the current situation. This would give more legitimacy to President Tsai Ing-wen's government and show the world the United States continues to oppose the influence of autocratic regimes, Stokes said.

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Joyce Juo-yu Lin, Director of the ASEAN Studies Center at Tamkang University, delivered remarks on Taiwan's internal initiatives to counter Chinese influence. Lin spoke at length on the role of Taiwan's New Southbound Policy (NSP) as an economic initiative working to attract two-way investment and growth between Taiwan and its southern neighbors. Taiwan has had previous Southbound Policies, but the NSP has focused more on attempts to maintain economic sovereignty and increase domestic economic initiatives. The NSP works to attract Southeast Asian immigrants to Taiwan to boost the domestic economy. Therefore, the NSP is more people-oriented than previous policies, Lin argued. This orientation has helped to legitimize Taiwan's government in the region, because Taiwan increasingly has served as a destination for workers seeking opportunity. As a testament to the effectiveness of this policy, Lin states that China has tried to influence Southeast Asian nations into boycotting the NSP. Yet Lin is optimistic about the future of Taiwan's NSP and how it could coordinate with organizations like ASEAN into fostering further development for Taiwan.

She hopes the NSP can be used as a shield in warding off Chinese influence.

Shelley Rigger, Brown Professor and Assistant Dean for Education Policy at Davidson University, explained in detail the current domestic political and economic climate of President Tsai Ing-wen's government. Rigger painted a picture of Taiwan's positive economic outlook despite pessimism from the general population. President Tsai Ing-wen has faced low polling numbers in contrast to the economy's relative success. Rigger interpreted the polling as having to do more with economic expectations, but also noted deep-seated anxiety over cross-strait issues as an additional factor. Additionally, she cited mixed messages from the U.S. on its support of Taiwan as an inhibiting factor to public confidence in the Tsai Administration.

Contrasting the negative polling data, Rigger explained that Taiwan's economy is performing quite well. Last year's

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GDP growth totaled 2.8 percent, and exports rose by fifteen percent, Rigger noted. Taiwan's previous shaky housing market is rebounding due to price cuts and has been adjusting out of a bubble. This has led to more affordable housing for the younger working population. Rigger added that wages have increased and unemployment has reached a ten-year low. Although the number of Chinese tourists to Taiwan has fallen due to increased pressure by the PRC government, total number of tourists has risen by twenty percent. Rigger concluded that the reason for anxiety across the population

is due to long term economic anxiety despite short term results. Good economic news has not sunk in for the population because longer term trends like American commitment to the island and Chinese assertiveness continue to cast a shadow on future economic gains. But Rigger added that Tsai would see no benefit to changing her cross-strait policy. In fact, a poll from January 2018 showed sixty percent of Taiwanese are satisfied with Tsai's cross-strait policy. Rigger called for shoring up American commitment to Taiwan in response to recent uncertainty. She explained that current American officials have acted without understanding the long-term U.S. policies for Taiwan. A more rigid U.S. commitment to Taiwan could

help contain Taiwan's own economic anxieties.

This Roundtable highlighted the need for a robust reexamination of U.S. commitment to Taiwan in the face of growing Chinese pressure and influence. In order to effectively counter Chinese influence, Stokes called for a realignment of the relationship in accordance to the objective reality of Taiwan's legitimate sovereignty. In closing remarks, he asserted this review must come from the White House directly in order to be effective. Lin observed the importance of Taiwan's NSP in leveraging Chinese economic influence and as a way of generating Taiwanese legitimacy abroad. In order to ease the nerves of Taiwan's economic insecurity, Rigger reinforced Stokes' call for a more proactive U.S. relationship with Taiwan. Domestic action, combined with U.S. support could help legitimize Taiwan's sovereignty and strengthen its economic prospects for the future.

*By Justin Seledyn, Research Assistant, Rising Powers Initiative, Sigur Center for Asian Studies*

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### ***About the Rising Powers Initiative and Sigur Center for Asian Studies***

The Sigur Center's Rising Powers Initiative examines how domestic political debates and identity issues affect international relations in Asia. RPI acknowledges support from the MacArthur Foundation and Carnegie Corporation of New York for its activities..

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