The U.S. View of Taiwan’s Future

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Viewed from a long-term perspective, since the late 1940s, U.S. policy toward the status of Taiwan has been governed by a desire to prevent the island from being forcibly absorbed by a communist state. In 1945, when Taiwan was taken from Japan and returned to China in accordance with the Cairo and Potsdam declarations, the confrontation between the Kuomintang (KMT), or the Nationalist Party, and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had not developed to the point at which the future of Taiwan presented a problem for Washington. Only after the failure of the Marshall mission, the defeat of the KMT in mainland China, and Chiang Kai-shek’s withdrawal to Taiwan in 1949 did the U.S. government focus on the future of Taiwan. By that time, the cold war had emerged, Mao Zedong had declared the CCP’s intention to “lean to one side,” and the newly established Peoples Republic of China (PRC) was about to sign a security treaty with the Soviet Union.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), asked by President Truman whether the strategic importance of Taiwan justified intervention by U.S. forces to prevent its conquest by the PRC, recommended against U.S. military intervention. U.S. forces were required in higher priority areas elsewhere. The JCS urged instead that non-military methods be employed to keep Taiwan out of communist hands.

The State Department explored various non-military options, including placing Taiwan under UN trusteeship, but none of these were feasible. Consequently, President Truman declared in January 1950 that the United States would not use its armed forces “to detach Formosa from China,” nor would it give military aid or advice to Chinese forces on Formosa. The predominant view in Washington at that time was that Taiwan would be taken over by the PRC.

The Impact of the Korean War

The invasion of South Korea by North Korean forces in June 1950 caused a reversal of U.S. policy. President Truman ordered the Seventh Fleet to prevent any attack in either direction across the Taiwan Strait. He said that “the future status of Formosa must await the restoration of security in the Pacific, a peace settlement with Japan, or consideration by the United Nations.” With the entry of Chinese forces into the Korean conflict, the cold-war division of the world hardened, and the importance to the United States of keeping Taiwan free of communist control increased.

For more than 20 years, Washington regarded Taiwan as an essential link in the containment chain resisting the spread of communism in East Asia. The United States ensured the security of Taiwan through a mutual security treaty signed in 1954, the intervention by U.S. forces to assist in the resupply of the offshore islands during their bombardment in 1958, and the provision of large amounts of military and economic aid. The United States also continued to recognize the government of the Republic of China as the legitimate government of China and mobilized diplomatic support for its retention of the China seat in the United Nations.

On April 28, 1971, in response to a question about who exercised sovereignty over Taiwan, the State Department spokesman gave the following answer: “In our view sovereignty over Taiwan and the Pescadores is an unsettled question subject...
to future international resolution. Both the Republic of China and the People’s Republic of China disagree with this conclusion. Both consider Taiwan and the Pescadores Islands part of the sovereign state of China. Obviously, we cannot hope to resolve the dispute between these two rival governments.

“Our position has been and remains very firmly that whatever the ultimate resolution of the dispute between the Republic of China on Taiwan and the PRC on the mainland, it should be accomplished by peaceful means.”

He said that there were two ways this could be worked out—internationally or directly by the two governments.²

The U.S.–PRC Rapprochement

By 1971 changing international conditions made it necessary for Washington to reconsider its policy toward Taiwan. Muster ing the votes needed to keep the PRC out of the UN was no longer possible. Moreover, relations between Moscow and Beijing had deteriorated to the point that military clashes had broken out on the Sino-Soviet border. Both Mao Zedong and Richard Nixon recognized that a rapprochement between their two countries would strengthen each vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. Consequently, Nixon traveled to China, and the two governments issued the Shanghai Communique.

In the Shanghai Communique the Chinese side restated its view that the PRC was the sole legal government of China and that Taiwan was a province of China that had been returned to the motherland. The U.S. side acknowledged that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintained that there was but one China and that Taiwan was a part of China, adding that the U.S. government did not challenge that position. It reaffirmed U.S. interest in a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question by the Chinese themselves.

The Shanghai Communique did not resolve the Taiwan issue but set it aside so that the two governments could proceed with developing their bilateral relationship. The United States did not expressly adopt a “one-China” position but did not challenge the one-China position held by the governments in Beijing and Taipei.

The Establishment of U.S.–PRC Diplomatic Relations

In 1979, in the joint communique establishing diplomatic relations between the United States and the PRC, the United States recognized the PRC as the sole legal government of China and acknowledged the Chinese position that there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China. The United States terminated diplomatic relations and the security treaty with the ROC and withdrew its military personnel from Taiwan. It declared that it would have only unofficial relations with the people of Taiwan.

In the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), adopted in April 1979, the United States expressed in strong terms its opposition to any use of force against Taiwan and declared that it would provide Taiwan with defensive arms and would maintain U.S. capability to resist any resort to force against the island. Passage of the TRA demonstrated that the United States, despite the recognition of the PRC as the sole legitimate government of China, was firmly opposed to any attempt to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means. It also marked the beginning of a tendency on the part of members of Congress to adopt a more pro-Taiwan posture than the administration on issues that produced clashes between Washington and Beijing.

The Arms Sales Issue

In the negotiations on the establishment of diplomatic relations, the U.S. government had rejected PRC demands that it halt arms sales to Taiwan. In 1981 the PRC raised the issue again.
During the negotiations that followed, President Reagan sent a letter, dated April 5, 1982, to Deng Xiaoping, vice chairman of the Chinese Communist party, in which he declared: “There is only one China. We will not permit the unofficial relations between the American people and the people of Taiwan to weaken our commitment to this principle.” In a subsequent letter to Hu Yaobang, chairman of the CCP, dated May 31, 1982, Reagan declared: “Our policy will continue to be based on the principle that there is but one China.”

On August 12, 1982, the two governments reached agreement on the issue of arms sales to Taiwan. In that communique the U.S. government declared that “it has no intention of infringing on Chinese sovereignty and territorial integrity, or interfering in Chinese internal affairs, or pursuing a policy of 'two Chinas' or 'one China, one Taiwan.'” In light of the Chinese declaration that it was pursuing “a fundamental policy of striving for a peaceful reunification of the Motherland,” the U.S. government stated that it intended “to reduce gradually its sale of arms to Taiwan, leading over a period of time to a final resolution.”

The two governments subsequently disagreed on whether “a final resolution” meant the termination of arms sales or the resolution of the Taiwan issue between Beijing and Taipei. The PRC denounced the continuing large-scale sale of weapons to Taiwan, particularly the sale of 150 F-16s in 1992, while the U.S. government justified the sales as required by the TRA to counter improvements in the PRC’s offensive capability against Taiwan. It became increasingly difficult to reconcile the level and quality of arms sales with the language of the 1982 communique, although it could be plausibly argued that the firing of missiles in 1995–1996 and the reiteration of threats to use force against Taiwan undermined the PRC’s assertion in the 1982 communique that its fundamental policy was peaceful reunification.

Changes in Cross-Strait Relations and International Circumstances

The opening of travel, trade, and investment across the Taiwan Strait beginning in 1987 greatly improved the prospects for eventual agreement between Beijing and Taipei on some form of political association between the two sides. The establishment of the Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF) and the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait (ARATS) provided a channel for resolving problems arising from Cross-Strait people-to-people relations and from the initiation of political talks. The prospective membership of both governments in the World Trade Organization (WTO) offered another framework for negotiating economic issues. The PRC’s policies of economic reform, its opening to the outside, and its fundamental goal of modernizing its society made possible growing cooperation between mainland China and Taiwan, especially in the economic field. All of these developments encouraged hope in Washington that differences between the two sides of the Strait could be resolved peaceably.

Unfortunately, a series of other developments increased tension and created confrontation between Beijing and Taipei. Lee Teng-hui’s Cornell visit caused Beijing to break off the promising SEF–ARATS talks and threaten Taiwan with military exercises and missile firings. The United States highlighted its opposition to the use of force against Taiwan by deploying two aircraft carrier groups to the vicinity of the island. Lee Teng-hui’s “state-to-state” declaration in July 1999 caused a second disruption of the SEF–ARATS channel, which had been reinstated with Koo Chen-fu’s visit to the PRC in 1998 after extensive preliminary Cross-Strait contacts. The gradual “Taiwanization” of the KMT under Lee Teng-hui and the growing stress throughout society on the Taiwanese culture and language increased the sense of Taiwan’s separateness and
disturbed the leaders in Beijing. The recovery of Hong Kong and Macau led to increased pressure by Beijing for an early resolution of the Taiwan issue. The unexpected election of Chen Shui-bian brought insistence by the PRC on categorical adherence to the one-China principle as a condition for the resumption of the Cross-Strait dialogue despite the relative moderation of Chen’s inaugural address.

Although the foregoing developments had contradictory effects on Cross-Strait relations, on the one hand, drawing the two sides closer but still keeping them apart, the U.S. attitude on the Taiwan issue was influenced by broader changes in the U.S.-China relationship. The televised clashes between soldiers and civilians in the Tiananmen affair created a lasting animosity among Americans toward the PRC’s Communist leaders, an animosity that was reinforced by subsequent acts of repression against dissidents in China. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the cold war weakened strategic arguments for U.S.-PRC cooperation. The accidental bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade provoked a strong anti-American reaction among the Chinese people, comparable to the impact of Tiananmen on Americans. Democratization in Taiwan, culminating in the election of a president from the opposition party, heighted the political contrast between Taiwan and mainland China.

On the other hand, economic reform, the opening to the outside, and the PRC’s prospective entry into the WTO broadened the prospect for growing economic cooperation between the United States and China. The U.S. House of Representatives, under heavy pressure from the administration and American business interests, passed a bill giving the PRC permanent normal trade relations, and the Senate seemed on the verge of passing a similar bill.

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The “Three Noes” and the “Three Pillars”

Throughout this 15-year period of changing Cross-Strait relations and shifting domestic and international pressures on the U.S.–China relationship, the U.S. government sought to maintain the basic elements of its Taiwan policy as defined by the three communiques and the Taiwan Relations Act. Some aspects of U.S. policy, implicit in those documents or stated privately by U.S. officials to the Chinese government, were now stated explicitly and publicly. The most authoritative statements were those made by President Clinton. In Shanghai in June 1998 he stated the “three noes”: the United States does not support independence for Taiwan or two Chinas or one Taiwan-one China or Taiwan’s membership in any organization for which statehood is a requirement. In July 1999 President Clinton defined the “three pillars” of U.S. policy as favoring the one-China policy, Cross-Strait dialogue, and the peaceful resolution of Cross-Strait differences. In February 2000, reacting to the PRC’s white paper threatening to use force if negotiations on reunification were delayed indefinitely, President Clinton rejected the use of force, stating that “we’ll continue to make absolutely clear that the issues between Beijing and Taiwan must be resolved peacefully and with the assent of the people of Taiwan.”

With respect to Taiwan’s future, the U.S. government has expressly rejected support for an independent Taiwan and for Taiwan’s membership in international organizations for which statehood is a requirement. It has never taken a position on what the nature of the relationship between mainland China and Taiwan should be—only that it should be worked out between the governments on the two sides of the Strait. It has demonstrated by word and deed its strong opposition to any use of force against Taiwan and has urged the two parties to resume their dialogue.

The United States has never expressed opposition to the peaceful unification of Taiwan with
mainland China whether by the one-country, two-systems concept or some other formula, but given the deep political differences between the two sides, any early resolution of the Taiwan issue is improbable. It is conceivable that given enough time, growing Cross-Strait economic integration, China’s further incorporation into the international system, and evolution toward democracy in the mainland will make political agreement possible. The past 20 years have demonstrated that the people on both sides of the Strait can prosper even though Taiwan is neither unified with the mainland nor fully independent. The problem for the United States is to strike the proper balance in its relations with Beijing and Taipei in order to nudge them toward cooperation and dialogue rather than toward separation and confrontation.

About the Author

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Notes

1 For a detailed account of the agonizing in Washington over the fate of Taiwan, see David M. Finkelstein, Washington’s Taiwan Dilemma, 1949–1950: From Abandonment to Salvation (Fairfax, Virginia, 1993).
2 Hungdah Chiu, ed., China and the Taiwan Issue (New York, 1979), 244–245.