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Taiwan and China: A geostrategic reassessment of U.S. policy

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ABSTRACT

Located offshore of Asia and Mainland China, Taiwan possesses strategic significance because of its location between Japan and The Philippines. Current U.S. policy dates from conditions existent during the Cold War, when China was relatively isolated, economically underdeveloped, and still undergoing the Cultural Revolution, while Taiwan was under martial law and ruled by an authoritarian dictatorship. Taiwan has since evolved into a multiparty, representative democracy while China has transformed itself into a major power, but has retained the one-party authoritarian rule of the Chinese Communist Party. U.S. policy needs readjusting to align with contemporary realities and future trends, which includes finding a balance between its One China policy and allowing the people of Taiwan a significant say in their future. Current American policy fosters a future scenario of poor choices to be made in the context of a crisis instigated at a time of China's choosing.

Setting

Located 120 miles east of the Chinese coast, Taiwan (Republic of China) is 14,000 square miles. In 2015, the population of nearly 23,480,000, of which roughly 18 million are Taiwanese, i.e., their ancestors immigrated from the Chinese provinces of Fujian and Guangdong in the 1700s and 1800s (Figure 1). Another 4.5 million date from the nationalist retreat from the Mainland (1947–1949) pursuant to their defeat by the communists, and 500,000 are aboriginals who reside mostly in the highlands.¹ The elongated main island (Formosa) is mountainous and bounded on the west by a somewhat broad coastal plain, whereas the east coast is noted for its rugged cliffs, albeit a small rift valley exists about 40 km (25 miles) inland at the junction of the Eurasian and Philippine plates.

Taiwan's relationship to Mainland China has varied greatly over the past 400 years. In the 1600s, Taiwan served both as a Dutch colony and a refuge for the exiled Chinese Ming government. Ultimately, Ming forces under the command of Koxinga (Cheng-kung), whose father was Chinese but mother was Japanese, defeated the Dutch in 1662.² Subsequently, the residual Ming government was routed by a Chinese invasion in 1683. The Chinese court of the Qing Dynasty repeatedly vacillated between allowing and prohibiting Han immigrants to settle in western Taiwan and failed to recognize eastern Taiwan.³ Eventually, provincial status was granted to the whole island in the late 1880s, when Japan sought control of Taiwan. Following the Sino-Japanese War in 1895, Taiwan was ceded to Japan and was ruled as a colony until 1945, although limited self-rule at a local scale was granted in the late 1930s.⁴ After World War II, Japan withdrew its forces and renounced sovereignty of Taiwan and the Pescadores in 1952 (Treaty of San Francisco). In the meantime, Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist (Kuomintang—KMT) regime relocated to Taiwan in 1949 following its numerous battlefield defeats to the communist forces under Mao.

Taiwan and the Western Pacific Basin

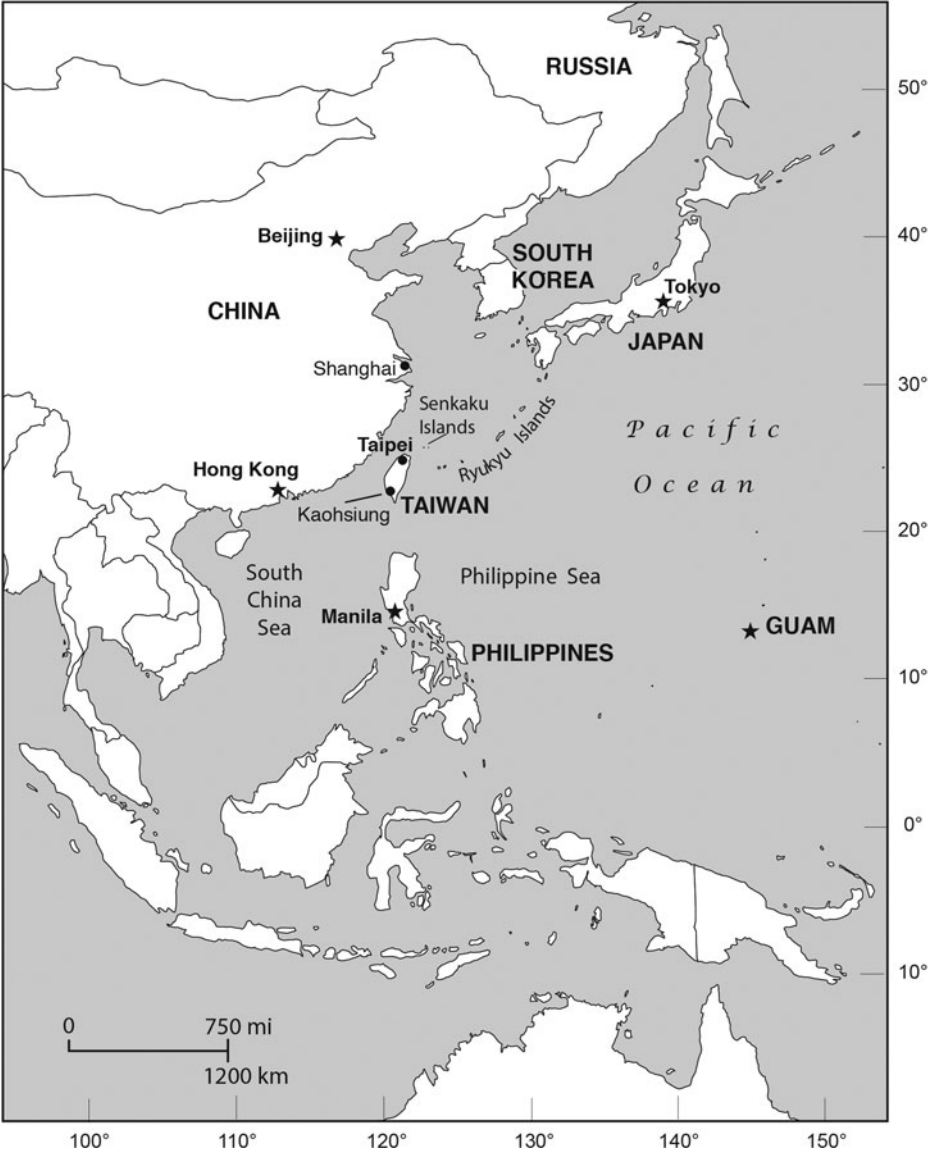


Figure 1. Regional context of Taiwan and the Western Pacific.

Sovereignty, jurisdiction, and territory

Modern nation states are territorially based and exert total authority over people within their boundaries.⁵ The possession of territory forms the boundary within which a sovereign power has jurisdiction to exercise the inherent powers of government, including taxation, expending funds, conducting defense and diplomatic affairs, controlling the flow of money, and policing through the enacting and enforcing of laws to promote the general welfare of the populace.⁶ Territory also forms a base upon which a sovereign power can deny or control access and project power.⁷ The restoration of territory is a nationalistic principle so foundational to a nation's cause that it will often pursue it fervently in the face of accentuated costs,

something American policymakers would do well to heed. Recent Russian interventions in Chechnya, the Ukraine, and the Crimea serve as examples.

The goal of territorial acquisition can follow short-, middle-, and long-term strategies as stated by O'Sullivan in *Geopolitics*. For instance, in the short run, propaganda or verbal statements are issued per the territory desired, which serve to announce intentionality and provide justification. The long-standing claim by the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) that Taiwan comprises a "rebel province" is a classic example. Such statements are followed by attempts to construct networks of influence and control within the targeted area. The PRC use of market access to Taiwanese-based entities comprises an example of the constructing of such networks to influence events in Taiwan through Taiwanese business connections. In the longer term, a power's total resource base consisting of military, economic, and diplomatic pressure is projected directly at the targeted territory. Barring sustained resistance and/or intervention by a third party, the territory succumbs to acquisition either by negotiated settlement or conquest.

Geographic and strategic significance

Taiwan's strategic position is important for a number of reasons. First, the loss of Taiwan to the PRC would constitute a significant breach in an unbroken American defense arc beginning in Alaska and extending from Japan through Taiwan and into the Philippines, forming what Nicolas Spykman referred to as the "Maritime Periphery" of East Asia (see [Figure 1](#)).⁸ Presently, as a land-based Asian power, the PRC faces a maritime periphery dominated by American sea and air power. Second, virtually all of Japan's oil imports pass within striking range of bases located on Taiwan. The Japanese Ryukyu Islands and the Senkaku (Dioyutai) Islands (claimed by Japan, PRC, and Taiwan) are only 225 km (140 mi) east-northeast of Taiwan. During WWII, the Japanese Imperial Navy controlled this region from Taiwanese bases, most notably from its installations at Kao-hsiung. The recent rise in tension between the PRC and Japan over these disputed areas and the unilateral declaration of an Air Identification Zone in 2013 by China, which overlaps a Japanese Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ), comprises an attempt by China to forge a permanent breach in Spykman's Maritime Periphery and implement a Great Wall in the Sky.⁹

Politically, the use of Taiwan as a base for projecting growing Chinese military power into the western Pacific would exasperate the long-standing historical animosities between China and Japan and likely foster a regional arms race between Japan and China. South Korea, which harbors historic hard feelings toward Japan dating from Japanese colonization (1905–1945) and WWII policies relative to Korean nationals, would be placed in a position of siding with a reformed and democratic Japan and a declining United States, or distancing itself from the U.S./Japan and realigning with an autocratic, but strengthening China, with the goal of Korean reunification occurring based on South Korea's political and economic models with implicit withdrawal of American forces.

Finally, boundaries marking power and control often do not correlate with legal statutory borders.¹⁰ The real American boundary relative to Taiwan and China in the Pacific begins about 80 km (50 miles) east of the Chinese shore. The loss of Taiwan to the PRC would place the PRC in the same strategic position as Imperial Japan relative to the Philippine Sea prior to the outbreak of WWII. Such a loss would mark the first rollback of U.S. entrenched sea power since 1945, with the PRC achieving a permanent breach in the aforementioned American defense arc. Effectively, the U.S. military would have to fall back and reinforce its presence in southern Japan and Guam. Pursuant to the Philippines, the U.S. would need to reinforce its positions there, while facing the possibility that the Philippines may decide to bandwagon with the up-and-coming Asian power, China. Such "bandwagoning" could easily translate into a very limited presence for U.S. forces and likely result in the nonrenewal of a current ten-year security agreement between the U.S. and The Philippines, that commenced in 2016.

On the contrary, an independent and neutral Taiwan would: (1) inhibit, though not eliminate, the PRC's force projection capability into the Pacific basin; and (2) serve as a buffer between China and Japan and ease pressures on the U.S. from having to side with one or the other. Unlike the Koreans, the Taiwanese do not harbor hard feelings against Japan because their colonial experience was far different and more benign than Korea's.

Strategic ambiguity and one China

Much has been written about the current U.S. policies of strategic ambiguity and the recognition of One China.¹¹ Nonetheless, the question arises: Does the U.S. have a contemporary stake in the Taiwan/China issue? If so, what policy should be advocated? Strategic ambiguity ignores these questions, and the current rendition of the One China policy does little better, since both reflect what was the status quo ante of 1972, when President Nixon first visited Chairman Mao. Since then, much has changed.

Strategic ambiguity and the One China policy state that the United States recognizes one China (the PRC), and that resolution of the Taiwan issue should be achieved by peaceful means. Strategic ambiguity is deliberately vague and forces the PRC and Taiwan to guess or hypothesize per Washington's true intentions. In the current geopolitical environment, the PRC actively seeks to restore a Greater China and increasingly acts to possess the hard power to accomplish this objective. Current American policies accentuate the probability of misunderstandings and misinterpretations, and merely postpone some sort of inevitable decision by one of the parties. On the other hand, strategic ambiguity works well, assuming each side has limited or near-zero force projection capabilities and that the passage of time is irrelevant in the short and medium terms. These assumptions, valid in the status quo ante circa 1972, are presently invalid; thus, current American policy rests on nonexistent foundational planks. Consequently, Washington needs to review its options or otherwise find itself making some sort of reactionary decision in the midst of a crisis with little or no forethought.

Much has changed since 1972, when the PRC was a backward and inwardly focused Marxist country in the midst of Mao's Cultural Revolution, and Taiwan (Republic of China) was ruled by martial law and possessed a right-wing dictatorial regime headed by Chiang Kai-shek that still envisioned the reconquest of the mainland. Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, the PRC initiated a series of economic reforms that, over the past thirty years, have resulted in the second-largest economy in the world, with economic and political interests in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Hong Kong and Macao have been added back to the Chinese motherland, with only Taiwan remaining as the outstanding entity in achieving the territorial aims of a restored Greater China indicative of the middle Qing Dynasty.

Nonetheless, the PRC remains an authoritarian regime controlled and operated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and shows no signs of abating its political monopoly. Personal freedoms, such as freedom of speech, assembly, and religion, although more relaxed than during the Cultural Revolution, are not guaranteed and are held at the whim of CCP officials. Party bosses base leadership ascension on a Marxist model of congresses, delegations, and appointments. The adult population remains disenfranchised and the current model in many respects parallels earlier dynastical structures.

In contrast, Taiwan has developed a more mature mixed economy and has evolved peacefully into a multiparty, representative democracy replete with guaranteed personal freedoms that began with the lifting of martial law in 1987. Subsequently, several constitutional reforms occurred and a series of elections were held, leading to the first presidential election in 1996. The adult population at-large elects local and national leaders. The island's youthful and free-wheeling democracy contained four major parties through 2007, and has since evolved into a two-party system following revised election laws in 2008.¹² Consequently, the KMT and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) are the two dominant political parties.

Power has shifted back and forth between these two parties and, like the U.S. model for representative democracy, split power, i.e., control of the executive and legislative branches can occur by opposite parties. This was the case in the middle 2000s, when the DPP held the presidency and the KMT possessed a legislative majority. Following the 2016 elections, the DPP has control of both the legislative and executive branches of government. The KMT generally favors reunification with China under terms favorable to Taiwan and at a time when China has undergone democratic reforms. The DPP favors an independent Taiwan and possesses a more Taiwanese outlook with a more limited affiliation with China.

American policy reassessed

Some American writers have stated that Taiwan's independence movement is in demise, as the younger generation seeks a Chinese rather than Taiwanese affiliation, or that a functioning democracy is not

sufficient for establishing sovereignty.¹³ These assertions have proven false, as the 2016 elections have made manifest with an overwhelming victory by the DPP. The Taiwanese have enjoyed over 65 years of *de facto* independence from the mainland, and when coupled with the previous fifty years of Japanese colonization (1895–1945), have not experienced political ties to the Beijing in over 120 years. A sovereign power ascertains authority by recurrent visits from its agents, with possession and control of territory being foundational to sovereignty.¹⁴ The PRC fails to meet these criteria regarding Taiwan currently, and even prior to 1895 only did so sporadically.

How does such a proactive policy reassessment square with Washington's long-standing "One China" doctrine? A reunified Taiwan obviously makes the question moot, while an independent Taiwan seemingly counters this fulcrum of U.S./PRC relations. But does it?

A restored Republic of China including the mainland was a political fantasy of Chiang Kai-shek and the KMT, but rejected by earlier U.S. policymakers beginning with President Eisenhower's naval intervention in the 1950s. President Eisenhower advised Chiang Kai-shek to abandon Quemoy and Matsu, which the KMT viewed as springboards for its reconquest of the mainland.¹⁵ A few years later, President Kennedy stated that the U.S. would defend Taiwan against a PRC invasion but would not support a KMT invasion of the PRC.¹⁶ A Republic of Taiwan makes no claim to be the one and only legitimate China. Consequently, the United States would continue to recognize the PRC as the One China, thereby eliminating any ambiguities that were ultimately fostered by the KMT and adhered to initially by the Truman administration some fifty-eight years ago. An independent Taiwan would be simply what it is *de facto* at present: another nation-state, but one with a political system more akin to the U.S., UK, and Japan. It would also serve as a valuable buffer between Japan and China, given its cultural and historical ties to both nations. Similarly, Taipei would need to find a balance between these outside entities so as not to tilt too far in any one direction. Although not a perfect analogy, an independent Taiwan would need to look to the examples of Austria and Sweden, which maintained a balanced rapport between the West and the USSR during the Cold War.

Application of present policies

Actions taken by the PRC and various conflicting signals sent by Washington make strategic ambiguity even more ambiguous. Since the middle 1990s, the PRC has engaged in a policy of intimidating and marginalizing Taiwan anywhere and everywhere possible. For example, in 1996, when Taiwan held its first open general election for president, the PRC launched live-fire missile exercises with the intention of intimidating the electorate against electing a pro-independence candidate.¹⁷ The U.S. responded by stationing two aircraft carrier battle groups east of Taiwan.¹⁸ Although the PRC's strategy thus far has failed, they have since placed over 1000 ballistic missiles aimed at Taiwan and passed a so-called Anti-Secession Act, which allegedly legitimizes the invasion of Taiwan should it declare independence.

Since 2002, the PRC Navy has acquired or built twenty-nine advanced diesel/electric and two nuclear attack subs, obtained advanced torpedoes, and upgraded its deep-sea mine-related warfare capabilities to support an "access-denial Taiwan-centric naval strategy."¹⁹ Internationally, the PRC routinely blocks Taiwan's full entry into the World Health Organization and uses access to its own domestic market to leverage foreign airlines from flying directly into Taiwan.

Against this backdrop, the United States during the Clinton era sent a variety of conflicting messages. The dispatch of the U.S. Navy to the Taiwan Strait and waters east of the island was widely viewed as a pro-Taiwan move. Two years later, when visiting the PRC, President Clinton issued his "Three No's": No to (1) Taiwan's independence, (2) any solution that creates two Chinas or one China and one Taiwan, or (3) Taiwan's admission into world organizations such as the United Nations.²⁰ The Clinton administration claimed this proclamation affirmed President Nixon's Shanghai Communiqué in 1972. The close of the Clinton era witnessed one more doublespeak action wherein the administration in 2000 (an election year) advocated the sale of air-to-air and anti-ship missiles to Taiwan.²¹

The Clinton-era actions need to be filtered through the lens of domestic election-year politics and the extreme passivity of U.S. media outlets. The U.S. naval show of force in 1996 came in a U.S. election year, when the incumbent publicly reinforced his image on the domestic front, especially since his party had

suffered devastating losses in the 1994 midterm elections and I contend that this was the primary factor behind the naval deployment. The Clinton administration showed no remorse in accepting campaign funds from PRC sources in 1996. However, Clinton's statement of the "Three No's," made on Chinese soil, only tilted U.S. policy toward the PRC and failed to examine the changes that occurred on both sides of the strait since 1972 relative to the context underpinning the 1972 communiqué. The only logical conclusion is reunification with the PRC, more or less setting the terms long after Clinton administration passed.

The Bush administration's view toward Taiwan's defenses became more pro-Taiwan. Based on a U.S. defense assessment conducted in 2000, the Bush administration recommended a robust package of air and naval upgrades in 2001 which included four Kidd-class destroyers, eight diesel-electric submarines, 12 P-3 Orions, and various armaments for the 150 F-16 a/b models flown by the Taiwan's air force. Bush also encouraged Taiwan to request Patriot III ABMs; U.S. Navy software that would help integrate air, naval, and ground command and control capabilities; and two UHR radars for long-range detection of Chinese cruise missiles.²² A hotline was established between the U.S. Pacific Command and Taiwan's military in 2002, and former and current U.S. military officers reviewed Taiwanese military exercises.²³ Congress passed Public Law 107-28, allowing active State and Defense Department personnel to be assigned to the American Institute of Taiwan, and designated Taiwan as a major non-NATO ally in 2002. Under President Obama, Taiwan received \$1.5 billion worth of defensive armaments and the modernization of the existing F-16 fleet is underway.

As the result of U.S. doublespeak, many Taiwanese waiver on their support for independence. Simply put: without a clear statement of support from the U.S. to counter PRC coercion, many in Taiwan also postpone or avoid the independence/reunification issue. This situation only empowers the PRC, which grows in strength every year, and by default favors the KMT position of reunification. However, the KMT, in spite of what may be considered "good intentions," is a party with a long record dating back to the Chinese Civil War and World War II of demonstrated failure and miscalculation in terms of strategic thinking and operational tactics. Taiwan's demand that the eight diesel-electric submarines be built in Taiwan with technology transfers to Taiwan, and foot-dragging pursuant to upgrading purchasing Patriot 3 ABMs and 66 F-16 c/d fighters in 2006, serve as recent examples, which occurred during an era when Taiwan had a sympathetic U.S. presidential administration. Ultimately, President Bush canceled the proposed sale of 66 F-16 c/d models in late 2006 and Taiwan's navy presently lacks any substantive submarine force.²⁴

Outcomes and future trajectories

As this drama slowly unfolds and Beijing's long-run ability to project power systematically increases, the PRC and the Chinese Communist Party will be in a position to set the terms of reunification, making manifest the chief blunder of the KMT's position and the long-term consequences inherent in the U.S. policy hinged on strategic ambiguity divorced from its foundational assumptions.²⁵

This situation leaves the United States with two options, both of which are reactionary, and would play out in a crisis atmosphere with likely little or no forethought. First, Washington could protest, threaten sanctions, recall its ambassador, and deliver on other procedural actions aimed ostensibly at countering the PRC's actions, but in reality amount to nothing more than a short-term public relations campaign aimed at minimizing the fall-out from the aforementioned status-quo-ante policies. This reaction, long on procedure and short on substance, alters nothing geopolitically; however, it would: (1) illustrate the ultimate in the American double standard wherein Washington invades a Middle Eastern country to forcibly plant democracy, yet through disengagement watches a fully functioning democracy being annexed by an authoritarian communist regime, (2) comprise a failure to execute its responsibilities as stated in the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, which includes protecting Taiwan from coercion,²⁶ and (3) lead to regional instability, as the Philippines and South Korea would then have to decide whether to bandwagon with the up-and-coming China or double-down with a declining U.S., and (4) lead to full-scale Japanese rearmament with offensive weaponry, resulting in a regional arms race between Japan and China.

Second, the U.S. could announce its intention to militarily intervene and support the option of an open and truly free referendum in Taiwan to decide the issue. However, such a proclamation made at this juncture would most likely result in a hot conflict with the PRC under conditions set by the PRC. Geographically, such a conflict would be confined primarily to the air and naval theaters, a situation presently favoring the United States, but with the PRC buildup of these services in an anti-access/area denial context, such favor diminishes each year.²⁷ In addition, a conflict with a power that is financing roughly 25 percent of the annual U.S. national deficit, is the de facto workshop for many U.S. industries, and remains a key player in the Korean standoff poses additional risks and costs.

Geostrategic reconsiderations for the Western Pacific

The present policy of strategic ambiguity is rooted in conditions and assumptions that no longer exist. Similarly, the rise of an independence movement in Taiwan makes obsolete the present interpretation of Washington's One China policy. Rooted in the long-standing American principle of self-determination, a policy clearly stating the Taiwanese people should be free to decide their own fate, with the United States not only honoring any decision they make but also countering the PRC's tactics of military intimidation and geopolitical marginalization, would decisively terminate strategic ambiguity and offer three major advantages.

First, the policy expressing overt support for self-determination is consistent with Taiwan's evolution into a multiparty democracy and the United Nations Charter Chapter 1 Article 1. From an American standpoint, self-determination is not without precedent. For example, in 1994 the U.S. allowed Puerto Ricans to vote on their preferred status of commonwealth, statehood, or independence, with the results being that only 4 percent opted for independence while the rest divided nearly evenly between retaining their commonwealth status versus the pursuit of statehood.

This policy readjustment would be difficult to proclaim due to the inertia of strategic ambiguity and the short-term angst it would cause with China; however, such a readjustment would save the United States from having to react in short order to a future crisis in which its options are limited and fraught with undesirable consequences, including the handing over of a functional representative democracy to an authoritarian regime controlled by the Chinese Communist Party. This latter point is simply unacceptable and makes a mockery out of any foreign policy based on self-determination. Moreover, it would signal the onset of the U.S. decline and China's ascension as the Pacific Century further unfolds.

Second, this proactive and unambiguous U.S. policy readjustment eliminates any misunderstandings that could occur under strategic ambiguity and reinforces existent defense arrangements contained in the Taiwan Relations Act.²⁸ It also buys more time for reform in China and ups the ante for China should it try to force the Taiwan issue in the immediate future.

Third, should the Taiwanese elect to pursue reunification either in the near or distant future, Washington is poised to serve as a diplomatic intermediary brokering direct talks between all parties in an open and forthright manner. Such a situation would give Taiwan the sense of a level playing field.²⁹ Washington would reap the benefits of being an integral player in settling what is, from Beijing's perspective, the reincorporation of a rebel province back into a Greater China. Within this diplomatic context, the United States could negotiate with Taiwan about the retrieval of certain military assets such as Kidd- and Perry-class destroyers, F-16 fighter jets, Patriot III ABMs, and potent radar detection units previously sold to Taiwan that should not be placed in Chinese hands. While the latter may seem trite, it comprises a major departure from the Hong Kong model, wherein the British simply withdrew their air and naval assets prior to Chinese takeover.

On the other hand, should the Taiwanese opt for independence or a long-term rendition of the current status quo (somewhat analogous to the Puerto Rico referendum in 1994), China would be preempted from using Taiwan as base for projecting hard power into the Pacific, thus maintaining China's maritime periphery as it presently stands. Moreover, Taiwan, with its government possessing Western political and legal values, could serve as a valuable broker between China and Japan. Taiwan possess cultural and/or historical affiliations with both these nation-states, thus adding to the long-term security of the region by reducing the scope of any regional arms race that may develop between China and Japan.

In short, the policy adjustment advocated herein provides the best option for maintaining a One China policy that: (1) prevents Taiwan from permanently becoming an offshore base for PRC force projections into the Pacific basin, thus breaching Spkyman's maritime periphery, (2) maintains Taiwan's status as a buffer between the PRC and Japan, (3) allows the U.S. the opportunity to broker reunification in an equitable manner and to retrieve certain military assets should the Taiwanese opt for reunification, and (4) prevents the U.S. from having to make a short-term decision with long-term consequences in an atmosphere of crisis at a time and place set by the PRC.

Trump administration: Moving forward

The election of Donald Trump as president of the United States and the appointment of Rex Tillerson as secretary of state could lead to a reassessment of U.S. policy, as both enter the Washington political environment as outsiders divorced from the inertia of past policies. Consequently, a favorable context exists for making such a reassessment. When President-elect Trump chose to answer a congratulatory phone call from Taiwan's President Tsai, he broke the precedent of not speaking directly to Taiwan's head of state.³⁰ Moreover, Trump noted the importance of Taiwan as a major purchaser of U.S. arms.³¹ From Taiwanese and Chinese perspectives, it is worth noting that much of Taiwan's military hardware for air and naval defense has been made under Republican administrations.

Nonetheless, a series of questions comes to the forefront as the Trump administration addresses U.S. policies in East Asia. As a default option, will the new administration simply settle into a policy pattern set by earlier administrations? The inertia associated with this situation may prove to be overwhelming. On the other hand, will a comprehensive reassessment of U.S. policies occur with requisite readjustments, some of which may include those made herein? Will a broader perspective that includes the reassessment of the asymmetric U.S. force deployment centered on the Korean peninsula also enter into a redefined Asian Pivot? What role, if any, will Japan play on influencing any U.S. reformulations? Finally, although President Trump has stated that the U.S. will adhere to a One China policy,³² the question becomes: How will such a policy be defined and implemented? How these questions are answered, or even if they are addressed, will have profound impacts on future developments and American involvement in East Asia.

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Notes on contributor

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