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Irresistible Trend

The US–China Interest Asymmetry and Taiwan’s Future

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Taiwan is one of the core issues in US–China relations. America’s position on the Taiwan issue has been the weathervane in the Western Pacific. This was true during the early stages of the Cold War, in US–China strategic cooperation after the Sino-Soviet split, and in the contemporary context of China’s rise. China’s rise after the Cold War.. In the past decade, with the deterioration of US–China relations, some US analysts have discussed crucial issues concerning Taiwan. Three profound questions needing further thought are should the United States abandon

Taiwan,¹ can the United States reach a grand bargain with China,² and does US policy toward Taiwan need to be unambiguous?³ Behind these discussions lies a core question: Is Taiwan’s security a core concern of the United States? Like in the United States, there are also different views in China. This article will try to provide an interpretation.

The Taiwan Issue in American Foreign Policy

In the context of China’s rapid rise, a growing number of US-based analysts have endorsed Taiwan as a core concern in the past decade. This trend is related to two factors. First, US policy toward China has undergone fundamental changes. Since the Obama administration, the United States has gradually adjusted its China policy, trying to strengthen US–Taiwan relations, while dealing with the unstable situation in the Taiwan Strait. Second, mainland China’s desire for reunification will be promoted accordingly. With Taiwan’s Tsai Ing-wen’s rejection of the 1992 Consensus, Beijing has switched its guideline for promoting reunification from “placing hope on the Taiwanese” to “placing more hope on the mainland itself.”⁴

In the United States, analysts debate whether Taiwan’s security is a core concern or not. Supporters of this idea point to the island’s strategic value for containing mainland China and to the issue of American credibility.

Opponents are concerned about the worst-case scenario: a showdown between China and the United States. This situation will ascertain the high costs that the United States will have to pay if it is determined to intervene to prevent a nonconsensual reunification. However, Taiwan's status as an issue in American foreign policy is dynamic. Whether Taiwan's security is a core concern of the United States depends not only on the historical framework but also on the United States, Taiwan, and mainland China. In different periods, the answer will not be the same.

To be sure, Taiwan is related to some vital interests of the United States, and the cost of abandoning Taiwan would be high. The United States would lose an essential tool with which to contain China in the Asia-Pacific region. Meanwhile, it would make a significant dent in the US commitment to its alliances, arguably weakening America's reputation in this respect. However, China is politically opposed to the United States regarding Taiwan as its core interest and even more opposed to the United States regarding Taiwan as part of its sphere of influence. Almost all Chinese people agree that the Taiwan issue concerns China's sovereignty. As stated in China's white paper, *The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Issue*, "[s]ettlement of the Taiwan issue and realization of the complete reunification of

China embodies the fundamental interests of the Chinese nation."⁵ On this point, there is a fundamental conflict between China and the United States.

Historically, the United States has abandoned and revalued Taiwan several times since World War II. In Chinese interpretations, Taiwan is a vital card that the United States can use to contain China. However, China and the United States have asymmetric interests on this issue.⁶ For China, Taiwan is related to the nation's reunification, which is a core issue of sovereignty upon which there can be no compromise. Regarded as one of China's constant core interests, Taiwan is at the forefront. For the United States, of course, Taiwan is also critical. Still, its significance is much lower than for China, which means it is a wavering core interest. Under some extreme circumstances in China and the United States, interests might be compromised. The constant core interest is one of the fundamental differences between Beijing's One-China Principle and Washington's One-China Policy: policies can change, whereas principles do not.

Will the US Intervene in a Future Taiwan Strait Conflict?

Another critical issue is whether the United States would intervene by force if there were a crisis across the Taiwan Strait in the future. This question seems easy to answer. In the

Three Communiqués, the United States has repeatedly reiterated its interest in the Taiwan issue's peaceful settlement. In the Taiwan Relations Act, the United States has also clearly expressed its "grave concern" about the use of nonpeaceful means.⁷ However, the United States' stated intention is one thing, and its realistic choice when facing the conflict is another. The tangible answer to this question is that it depends on the prevailing US calculation of its benefits and costs.

The United States has abandoned its allies twice in the Asia-Pacific: Pres. Richard Nixon's withdrawal from South Vietnam in 1973 and Pres. Jimmy Carter's establishment of diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China and disconnection with the Republic of China in Taiwan in 1979. These two abandonment instances have in common that they were both high-cost and highly beneficial from the US perspective.

It is unlikely that the United States will choose to abandon Taiwan to be because it eyes strategic gains. The strategic opportunity that China and the United States had to balance against the Soviet Union during the Cold War jointly will not repeat. Additionally, the possibility of a grand bargain between China and the United States in the Western Pacific is also very low. However, China may impose high costs to compel the United States to

abandon Taiwan. After all, the United States has always been ambiguous about the form and extent of any interventions it would take in Taiwan's defense; *grave concern* is a phrase with a wide range of policy space. Therefore, it is uncertain how the United States might intervene in future conflicts in the Taiwan Strait, particularly if Washington judged the costs of intervention to be high. An intervention could be military in nature, but it could also take the form of political isolation or economic sanctions against Beijing.

America's conflicted position on whether it would intervene militarily in the Taiwan Strait has implications for China. According to common sense, it is unrealistic for China to formulate its strategy and policy to assume that the United States would not intervene in Taiwan. Instead, China must prepare for the worst-case scenario: a US military intervention in China's reunification. The expectation of US intervention will be a constant in Chinese strategic planning. This is not to say that China regards the United States as an adversary. Rather, the expectation of US intervention is merely unavoidable in the context of US equivocation and ambiguity.

China welcomes the United States to play a constructive role in China's peaceful reunification. As Huang Jiashu, a professor at the Renmin University of China, pointed out, "the

most ideal choice is to let the United States help us in the final peaceful settlement of the Taiwan issue. If such a goal can't be achieved, at least we should not let the United States become an obstacle. If such a goal still can't be achieved, at least we can let the United States play a positive role in opposing Taiwanese independence.”⁸ In the past, China and the United States accepted the ambiguity of each other's positions. However, with the growing intensity of strategic competition, all parties' policy space is getting smaller, and the Taiwan Strait crisis is emerging.⁹

The future conflict between China and the United States on Taiwan is a rivalry of strength and a clash of resolve—a contest between China's determination to uphold its state sovereignty and the United States' resolve to defend its commitment. As the power gap between China and the United States shrinks, the willpower contest will become a decisive factor. This historical trend is apparent. The strategy of using Taiwan to contain mainland China may entangle the United States in a disastrous direct conflict between China and the United States, turning Taiwan into a “strategic high-risk asset” of the United States.¹⁰

If China becomes determined to start the agenda of reunification, its leaders will do so prudently but ready to bear any costs, including political isolation,

economic sanctions, and military intervention. For the United States, the price is bound to be very high. The final result will most likely be that the United States cannot stop China's reunification process militarily. Washington can only impose costs on China through political isolation and economic sanctions to make up for its loss in reputation.

Conclusion

There is a vast asymmetry of interests between China and the United States on the Taiwan issue, which leads to the asymmetry of resolve. That will be the crucial factor affecting the situation in the Taiwan Strait in the future. If one day, China and the United States must make independent decisions on the future of Taiwan, whether Taiwan's security is a core concern of the United States will become a simple choice. In this regard, some US-based analysts, such as Barry R. Posen, John J. Mearsheimer, and Charles Glaser, have pointed out the historical trend. Unfortunately, their view is not mainstream in the United States, and it is difficult to convert into foreign policy. ■

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Notes

¹ Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 102–04; John J. Mearsheimer, “Taiwan’s Dire Straits,” *National Interest*, no. 130 (2014), 29–39; and John J. Mearsheimer, “RIP Taiwan?” *National Interest*, 24 July 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/>.

² Charles Glaser, “Will China’s Rise Lead to War?: Why Realism Does Not Mean Pessimism,” *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 2 (2011): 80–91; Nancy Bernkopf Tucker and Bonnie S. Glaser, “Should the United States Abandon Taiwan?,” *Washington Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (2011): 23–37; Charles L. Glaser, “A U.S.-China Grand Bargain? The Hard Choice between Military Competition and Accommodation,” *International Security* 39, no. 4 (2015): 49–90; and Ely Ratner, “There Is No Grand Bargain with China: Why Trump and Xi Can’t Meet Each Other Halfway,” *Foreign Affairs*, 27 November 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>.

³ Richard Haass and David Sacks, “American Support for Taiwan Must Be Unambiguous,” *Foreign Affairs*, 2 September 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>; and Bonnie S. Glaser et al., “Dire Straits: Should American Support for Taiwan Be Ambiguous?,” *Foreign Affairs*, 24 September 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>.

⁴ Xin Qiang, “Having Much in Common? Changes and Continuity in Beijing’s Taiwan Policy,” *Pacific Review*, 5 June 2020, <https://doi.org/>.

⁵ Taiwan Affairs Office and The Information Office of the State Council, *The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Issue*, February 2000, <http://www.taiwan.cn/>.

⁶ Robert S. Ross, “Navigating the Taiwan Strait: Deterrence, Escalation Dominance, and U.S.-China Relations,” *International Security* 27, no. 2 (2002): 48–85.

⁷ *Taiwan Relations Act*, Public Law 96-8, 10 April 1979, <https://uscode.house.gov/>.

⁸ Huang Jiashu, “Lun heping tongyi zhi lujing zhuanhuan [On the Path Transformation of ‘Peaceful Reunification’],” *Taiwan Yanjiu [Taiwan Studies]*, no. 6 (2017), 5.

⁹ Zuo Xiyang, “Unbalanced Deterrence: Coercive Threat, Reassurance and the US-China Rivalry in Taiwan Strait,” *Pacific Review*, 3 December 2019, <https://doi.org/>.

¹⁰ Xin Qiang, “Zhanlue gaoweizichan: quanli geju, zhongmei guanxi yu Taiwan zhanlue juece de shanbian [Strategic High-Risk Assets: Power Structure, Sino-US Relations and the Evolution of Taiwan’s Strategic Role],” *Taiwan Yanjiu Jikan [Taiwan Research Journal]*, no. 4 (2020): 72–83.