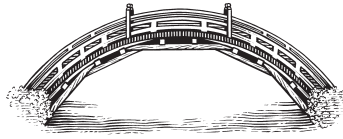


ROUNDTABLE

Defining a Healthy Balance Across the Taiwan Strait



Robert Sutter

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Introduction

In praising the October 2008 U.S. arms sale to Taiwan as an important response to the island's defense needs, then presidential candidate Barack Obama articulated the need to maintain a "healthy balance" across the Taiwan Strait. Questions persist, however, about what exactly should constitute this healthy balance between the mainland and Taiwan. The U.S. Congress, for its part, has articulated Washington's "unwavering commitment" to providing Taiwan with sufficient defensive weaponry to deter coercion by the mainland. President Obama's top diplomat to Taiwan has reiterated this commitment, stating that Washington's position in this regard "remains unchanged."

Is a healthy balance, then, defined purely in terms of weapon sales? If not, to what extent should other considerations play a role in determining this balance? Recent years have seen dramatic changes in the broader context of U.S.-Taiwan relations. Taiwan president Ma Ying-jeou has asserted his aim to conduct "surprise-free and low key" foreign policy, and has emphasized the need to "move cross-strait relations forward and beyond the hostility and brinkmanship" of the preceding Chen Shui-bian administration. This approach has precipitated an unprecedented upswing in Taiwan's relations with the mainland, characterized by the inauguration of direct charter flights across the strait, two rounds of high-level bilateral talks, investment agreements, discussions of future military confidence-building measures (CBM), and the possible signing of a comprehensive trade pact. Should this warming of relations affect Washington's definition of a healthy military balance?

Alongside the steady cross-strait rapprochement, the ongoing economic crisis has highlighted China's emergence as a major player on the global stage with expanding economic and military clout. Washington's capacity to confront the current economic crisis as well as advance a host of other interests in the region and beyond increasingly will require the cooperation of Beijing. Does the need for cooperation between the United States and China alter the determination of what constitutes a healthy balance?

Asia Policy has invited a number of distinguished scholars with diverse perspectives to offer their thoughts on these questions in an effort to increase the number of informed voices in the debate over the future of U.S.-Taiwan relations.

China's Power and the Fading U.S. Goal of "Balance" in the Taiwan Strait

Robert Sutter

President Ma Ying-jeou's efforts to ease tensions in the Taiwan Strait are supported by the United States. Ma's moderate approach stands in welcome contrast to the cross-strait policies of his predecessor, President Chen Shui-bian. Chen provoked China repeatedly as he raised cross-strait tensions to sometimes dangerous levels through various pro-independence initiatives.¹

As in Taiwan, attention in the United States now focuses on progress in further easing tensions though Ma's policy of interchange with and reassurance of China. Rapidly developing China-Taiwan economic and social contacts are complemented by much slower progress regarding Taiwan's international profile and the military build-up China continues to direct at Taiwan. U.S. policymakers and other interested observers are anxious to see if Beijing will reciprocate Taipei's accommodation by allowing Taiwan to participate in the activities related to the World Health Organization, as well as whether China will ease military pressure through confidence-building or other measures. The U.S. inclination to support the positive in Ma's reassurance policy toward China adds to an overall "positive and constructive" U.S. approach to China, voiced during Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's trip to Asia in February and President Barack Obama's meeting with President Hu Jintao in London in April. U.S. and Chinese leaders play down U.S.-China differences in the interests of advancing cooperation on important economic, environmental, and regional issues.²

Support for the positive in recent cross-strait relations should not blind Americans to the risks and potentially adverse trends affecting U.S. interests in the cross-strait dynamics. In particular, the United States' encouraging approach to China and U.S. support for President Ma's strong efforts to reassure China have not directly addressed changing realities of power and influence

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¹ Shelley Rigger, "Needed: A Newish U.S. Policy for a Newish Taiwan Strait," Foreign Policy Research Institute, E-Notes, March 2009 ~ <http://www.fpri.org/enotes>.

² David Brown, "China-Taiwan Relations: New Economic Challenges," *Comparative Connections* 11, no. 1 (April 2009) ~ http://www.csis.org/component/option,com_csis_pubs/task,view/id,5407/type,1/; and Bonnie Glaser, "U.S.-China Relations: A Good Beginning Is Half Way to Success," *Comparative Connections* 11, no. 1 (April 2009) ~ http://www.csis.org/component/option,com_csis_pubs/task,view/id,5407/type,1/.

regarding Taiwan. Although easing tensions and promoting stability, support for Taiwan's outreach to China also coincides with and sometimes indirectly reinforces ever-growing and deepening Chinese influence over Taiwan.

Economically, this trend of growing Chinese influence is seen in the deepening of Taiwan's trade and investment commitment to China, which culminated recently in the proposed Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement, later called the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement. Diplomatically, China's effectiveness in isolating Taiwan has reached a point where it appears to many observers that Taiwan is directly seeking China's permission in order to gain the ability to interact with the World Health Assembly and other organizations. Militarily, the cross-strait balance continues to tip in the favor of China and its large build-up during many years in which Taiwan's defense spending and military preparations were much less than rigorous.³

The Issue of Balance

U.S. policy has not publicly addressed these trends in cross-strait power dynamics, which appear to this observer to go against the long-standing U.S. objective of sustaining a balance of power and influence in the Taiwan Strait both favorable to the United States and Taiwan and influenced strongly by the United States. This goal was a centerpiece of U.S. policy during the Cold War. Even after the break in official relations, U.S. efforts to shore up Taiwan diplomatically, economically, and militarily in seeking an appropriate balance in cross-strait relations were seen in provisions of the Taiwan Relations Act in 1979, in U.S. efforts to preserve Taiwan's seat in the Asian Development Bank in the 1980s, in U.S. efforts to support Taiwan's representation in APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) in the 1990s, and in U.S. support for Taiwan's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001.⁴

³ For competing U.S. perspectives on the implications of these trends, see Robert Sutter, "Cross-Strait Moderation and the United States—Policy Adjustments Needed," Pacific Forum, Center for Strategic and International Studies, PacNet Newsletter, no. 17, March 5, 2009 ~ http://www.csis.org/component/option,com_csis_pubs/task,view/id,5318/type,3/; and Richard Bush and Alan Romberg, "Cross-Strait Moderation and the United States—A Response to Robert Sutter," Pacific Forum, Center for Strategic and International Studies, PacNet Newsletter, no. 17A, March 12, 2009 ~ http://www.csis.org/component/option,com_csis_pubs/task,view/id,5345/type,3/.

⁴ James Lilley, "U.S.-Taiwan Security Relations and the People's Republic of China: A Personal Retrospective," in *Implementation of the Taiwan Relations Act: An Examination after Twenty Years*, ed. Hungdah Chiu, Hsing-wei Lee, and Chih-Yu Wu (Baltimore: University of Maryland School of Law, 2001), 147-74; and Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, *Strait Talk: United States-Taiwan Relations and the Crisis with China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 129-47.

U.S. leaders still talk in terms of maintaining a favorable balance in the Taiwan area. In October, while running as a presidential candidate, then senator Obama noted the need for such a “healthy balance” in commentary on proposed U.S. arms sales to Taiwan. Director of National Intelligence and former head of Pacific Command, Admiral Dennis Blair, reassured a congressional committee on February 12 that the United States maintained a commitment to help Taiwan sustain a military balance in the face of China’s build-up.⁵

U.S. policymakers may yet take steps to strengthen Taiwan’s position relative to rising China. At the same time, it is also likely that some U.S. policymakers agree with prominent non-government U.S. specialists who argue that balance should not be overemphasized. According to these specialists, balance is merely a means to the end of a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue, which under present conditions appears more likely to be reached than at any time in the past.⁶

In contrast, this observer supports the two-fold wisdom that has traditionally held sway: the view that Taiwan is unlikely to achieve a worthwhile settlement with China without clear military, economic, and international strengths, and the view that supporting those strengths best serves U.S. interests. As a corollary, progress on minor issues—such as participation in creating a UN-affiliated assembly or confidence-building meetings—may be ephemeral; such “progress” also ignores China’s rise and what this rise means both for advancing China’s influence and preponderance in cross-strait relations and for a seeming accompanying reduction in U.S. influence over cross-strait relations.

The author comes to this position of concern with a strong record of having argued against not only exaggerating China’s rising influence in Asia but also underestimating the power and influence of the United States. The United States remains by far Asia’s leading power, and neither China nor any other power or coalition of powers will challenge that position anytime soon.⁷ The author also acknowledges various forces in Taiwan that could be expected to resist any move by Taipei toward China that is deemed an excessive compromise of Taiwan’s interests.

China’s influence, however, is spreading incrementally and strongly in most areas adjoining China. These areas are becoming evermore closely

⁵ Sutter, “Cross-Strait Moderation.”

⁶ Bush and Romberg, “Cross-Strait Moderation.”

⁷ Robert Sutter, *The United States in Asia* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009).

integrated with China economically, socially, politically, and in other ways through burgeoning trade and investment, enhanced communications, infrastructure connections, united front exchanges used by the Chinese Communist Party over the years, espionage, and other means. Taiwan is a good example of these trends showing growing Chinese influence. As a result of increasing connections with China, in addition to the preponderance of Chinese military power—starkly evident in the case of Taiwan—leaders in Asian governments bordering China tend to avoid actions that would offend their powerful neighbor.


These kinds of connections and Chinese gains are clearly evident in the case of Taiwan. Taiwan's economic and diplomatic dependence on China is noted above. Significant majorities in Taiwan—from the top leadership down to general public opinion—show little interest in following the advice of U.S. supporters in providing consistent funding for Taiwan defense efforts that would complement U.S. actions to balance the People's Liberation Army (PLA) build-up. Kuomintang leaders are more than willing to engage in so-called united front activities with Chinese Communist Party leaders that duly benefit constituents in Taiwan as their mainland counterparts build connections with influential leaders and constituencies on Taiwan. The scope of Chinese espionage in Taiwan is unknown, but past reports of senior Taiwan intelligence officials retiring and moving to China seem important to some Americans concerned about penetration of Taiwan.


In this context and against the backdrop of the failed provocative policies of Chen Shui-bian, President Ma pragmatically sees Taiwan's interests as best served by reassuring China and avoiding confrontation or disagreement that might result from stronger Taiwanese efforts to work with the United States and others in an effort to balance against rising Chinese influence over Taiwan. For now, this is not a problem for U.S. policy. U.S. leaders in the latter years of the Bush administration and in the initial period of the Obama administration have remained loath to take strong efforts to balance against the rise of Chinese influence over Taiwan. Instead, the United States pragmatically has sought common ground and tended to put aside differences in dealing with China. Although senior Taiwan officials and some U.S. specialists expect government actions to enhance


the relationship between the two countries, these actions may not reverse Taiwan's increasing dependency on China.⁸

Questions for U.S. Policy

Thus, the above trends reinforcing increasing Chinese influence over Taiwan seem likely to continue and grow. Their development appears at odds with past U.S. views of an appropriate balance in the Taiwan area and raises questions for U.S. policy.

How best to promote Chinese accommodation of Taiwan?  Of immediate interest, does the growing imbalance make China more or less likely to be accommodating? This accommodation could be to Taiwan's requests for participation in activities related to the World Health Organization in particular and participation in international affairs more broadly, or to Taiwan's requests for concessions regarding an easement of Chinese military pressure on Taiwan? Such concessions may not come about unless Taiwan, presumably with U.S. support, works more effectively to show China that a lack of accommodation on Beijing's part will force Taiwan to pursue—with U.S. backing—a different international and military path. Unless faced with a serious cost, China has shown great agility in stringing out talks and other processes while avoiding concessions on sensitive issues regarding human rights, relations with Burma and Sudan, and territorial disputes in the South China Sea as well as with India, Japan, and other countries. For now at least, neither the United States nor Taiwan shows much interest in demonstrating such resolve toward China—preferring instead to emphasize the positive and reassure Beijing.

How to deal with growing imbalances in cross-strait relations?  Is it wise for U.S. policy to emphasize the positive in cross-strait dialogue and exchanges without addressing growing imbalances in the relationship between China and Taiwan? Policy experts advising John McCain and others argued for a robust build-up of U.S. support for Taiwan to counter what they viewed as recent adverse trends toward greater asymmetry between Taiwan and China. Concerns in Washington and Taipei, however, regarding fostering positive relations with and reassuring China have overshadowed this more robust approach.

⁸ On U.S.-Taiwan bilateral relations, see Bonnie Glaser, "What Hu Jintao Should Expect: Predictions about Obama Administration Policy toward Taiwan," Pacific Forum, Center for Strategic and International Studies, PacNet Newsletter, no. 1, January 5, 2009  http://www.csis.org/component?option=com_csis_pubs/task/view/id,5184/type,3/.

Should the prospect of cross-strait accommodation override U.S. concern with balance? If so, how should the government explain this change of policy to Americans? ≈ Some officials and policy specialists in Washington and Taipei privately say that recent easing of tensions and cross-strait trends works well for longer-term U.S. interests regarding Taiwan. They assert that support for these trends should supersede traditional U.S. concern with sustaining balance. The U.S. government has not effectively made this case yet. The argument is also not well understood by many congressional officials as well as by media and other representatives with an interest in U.S. policy toward Taiwan who still see U.S. interests as being based on seeking appropriate balance that is influenced by the United States. Additionally, at least some in the latter group are skeptical that Taiwan can reach worthwhile agreements on sensitive issues with China given Taipei's perceived weak bargaining position as a result of China's growing influence over the island.

Providing Some Answers


Against this background, the United States needs to make the following policy adjustments.



A Taiwan policy review. ≈ The Obama administration should undertake a quiet but careful review of U.S. policy options—one that takes account of the full implications of China's markedly increased influence over Taiwan along with the perceived benefits of reassuring Beijing in the interest of cross-strait stability.

Shore up the balance? ≈ What to do in the unlikely event that the U.S. policy review determines that substantial efforts to shore up Taiwan's position are warranted? In such a case, it would be necessary to determine whether or not major U.S. efforts to shore up support for Taiwan militarily, diplomatically, and economically would be welcomed by Taiwan, particularly by a Ma Ying-jeou administration focused on reassuring China in cross-strait relations. Washington would also need to determine whether U.S. actions would likely prompt Beijing to ease diplomatic and military pressure against Taiwan.

Explain the policy shift to U.S. stakeholders. ≈ If, as seems likely under prevailing trends, the policy review recommends putting aside or seriously modifying the long-standing U.S. emphasis on sustaining a balance of influence in the Taiwan area that is favorable to and heavily influenced by the United States, U.S. policymakers need to consult closely with, educate, and persuade congressional, media, and other representatives with a stake in U.S.-Taiwan relations on the benefits of the new approach. Otherwise, policymakers

risk a repetition of major negative backlash—seen in past episodes of U.S. policy toward China—that could adversely affect contemporary U.S.-China relations.

Explain the policy shift to Japan; adjust U.S. contingency plans in the Asia-Pacific.  Any modification of past emphasis on balance in the Taiwan Strait brought on by China's ever-growing influence in the area would require U.S. policymakers to think through the resulting consequences. Most important would be the effect on broader U.S. strategic plans to work with Asia-Pacific allies, notably Japan, and other regional partners in constructing contingency plans to hedge against the possibility that rising China may become aggressive or disruptive to the regional order. In this context, U.S. policy would appear to need a clearer understanding of whether or not Taiwan is considered inside or outside U.S. contingency plans to hedge against the rise of China's power in Asia.

Mediate, negotiate with China over Taiwan?  It appears important for U.S. policymakers to determine the possibilities for policy change brought on by greater U.S. acceptance of China's powerful influence over Taiwan in conjunction with Ma's policy of asymmetrical reassurance of China. In particular, would such a change allow possible U.S. mediation and closer interchange with China over the future of Taiwan, policy options that have been eschewed by U.S. policymakers since the negative experiences of Patrick Hurley and George Marshall in the 1940s? Admiral Timothy Keating, commander of Pacific Command, on February 18 offered to host meetings between Taiwan and Chinese military officials in order to ease cross-strait tensions. Though seeming sensible in the current situation, the offer also appeared to contradict long-standing U.S. assurance to Taiwan that the United States would not mediate between Taiwan and China. 

Seeking Something Bigger than Balance in Cross-Strait Relations

Jianwei Wang

With regard to maintaining a “healthy balance” across the Taiwan Strait, an interesting debate has taken place recently among U.S. specialists on Taiwan. Robert Sutter has argued that the long-standing U.S. policy goal is to maintain “a balance of power and influence in the Taiwan area favorable to Taiwan and U.S. interests and influenced by the United States.”¹ This balance has been eroded since Ma Ying-jeou came to power in Taiwan last May. Richard Bush and Alan Romberg have disagreed, however, pointing out that the goal of the United States regarding the Taiwan Strait over the last 50 years “has been the maintenance of peace and stability in the Strait.”² Maintaining a balance of power and influence is a means rather than an end. In a sense, both positions are right. Even as maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait is a long-term and broad goal of U.S. policy, sustaining a balance of power and influence is very often Washington’s short-term objective. As Hans Morgenthau once said, whatever the ultimate aims of international politics, power is always the immediate aim.³ Therefore, maintaining a healthy balance across the Taiwan Strait could be a U.S. policy objective, as President Barack Obama implied in his remarks on arms sales to Taiwan last August during the presidential campaign. The real questions, however, are what kind of balance Washington is seeking and whether such balance per se is sufficient to sustain peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.

These are not simple and easy questions to answer. To begin with, maintaining a balance of power between China and Taiwan is quite literally a “mission impossible.” This relationship is asymmetric in nature due to the critical mass of mainland China. The United States often justifies the sale of weapons to Taiwan as necessary for maintaining military balance across the strait. In reality, unless the United States is willing to sell massive amounts

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¹ Robert Sutter, “Cross-Strait Moderation and the United States—Policy Adjustments Needed,” Pacific Forum, Center for Strategic and International Studies, PacNet Newsletter, no. 17, March 5, 2009.

² Richard Bush and Alan Romberg, “Cross-Strait Moderation and the United States—A Response to Robert Sutter,” Pacific Forum, Center for Strategic and International Studies, PacNet Newsletter, no. 17A, March 12, 2009.

³ Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), 25.

of advanced weapons to Taiwan, arms sales cannot keep pace with mainland China's steadily increasing military prowess. In a way, arms sales are more symbolic, demonstrating Washington's commitment to Taiwan's security. It is the unwritten but well-understood commitment of the United States to defending Taiwan against military attack from the mainland that has helped create a sense of balance in cross-strait relations. The military balance between Taiwan and the mainland, therefore, is only credible if the U.S. military is included in the equation. That is how the United States has played the role of a balancer in cross-strait relations over the past three decades. The possibility of U.S. military intervention is what has given Beijing pause when considering whether to use force against perceived movement toward Taiwanese independence. Therefore, arms sales alone cannot constitute a healthy balance across the Taiwan Strait. At most, what arms sales can accomplish is to slow to some degree the growing imbalance between Taiwan and the mainland.

From this perspective, a healthy balance across the Taiwan Strait cannot be purely understood in military terms. Indeed, what occupied the United States in the last eight years during Chen Shui-bian's tenure was more political than military balancing. The Bush administration made it clear that Washington opposes "any unilateral decision by either China or Taiwan to change the status quo."⁴ Because it was the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government that attempted to change the status quo in the direction of *de jure* independence, Washington applied more pressure on Taipei. Such a strategy eventually worked, and Chen Shui-bian refrained from taking more provocative steps toward independence. Drawing upon this episode, one could argue that the key for peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait is not necessarily military balance but rather Beijing's perception of the prospect and proximity of Taiwan's independence. It is widely believed that if Taiwan publicly declares independence, Beijing mostly likely would still resort to the use of force regardless of whether the military balance favors Taiwan and the United States. On the other hand, if the prospect of Taiwan independence is dim, the probability of Beijing using force would be remote, even if the mainland is advantaged militarily.

The low prospect that Taiwan will move toward independence is the new reality developing across the Taiwan Strait since Ma Ying-jeou took office last May. Beijing has thus begun to adopt "peaceful development" as the main theme for cultivating cross-strait relations. The booming economic, cultural, and personnel exchanges across the Taiwan Strait, as exemplified by the long

⁴ James G. Lakely, "Bush Warns Taiwan Against Separation," *Washington Times*, December 10, 2003.

overdue materialization of the “three links,” have moved the strait further away from possible military conflict and toward peaceful coexistence and co-prosperity. One aspect of the relationship that stands out as being at odds with Beijing’s overall approach toward Taiwan, however, is China’s continuous missile build-up along the coastal area facing the island. Some U.S. analysts and politicians interpret this build-up as an indication of Beijing’s malicious intention toward Taiwan and hence are pushing for more arms sales to Taiwan in order to maintain “balance.” China’s military build-up and U.S. arms sales therefore potentially hinder rather than facilitate the formation of a healthy balance across the strait. Who should be blamed for this discord in an otherwise general warming of cross-strait relations? Beijing argues that U.S. arms sales encourage the pro-independence forces in Taiwan and make it more difficult for China to reverse military build-up. Washington counters that Beijing’s persistent missile deployment is what makes arms sales to Taiwan necessary. This is a typical example of an action-reaction spiral.

In 2002, then Chinese president Jiang Zemin proposed to President George W. Bush that if the United States could restrain arms sales to Taiwan, China would consider reducing its missile deployment facing Taiwan. Reportedly the U.S. response at the time was that Jiang needed to discuss this issue with Taiwan. Perhaps it is time for all three parties involved to revisit this issue under the new circumstances brought on by Ma Ying-jeou’s election. As the much stronger party in cross-strait relations, Beijing could take the first step of reducing or at least freezing missile deployments opposite Taiwan while waiting for reciprocal moves from Taipei and Washington to reduce or even suspend arms deals as well as modify military ties. If such an initial step were not politically feasible for Beijing, an alternative could be the “action to action” formula that has been adopted in the six-party talks on the North Korean nuclear issue, whereby all parties take good-will actions simultaneously. Such an approach could facilitate cross-strait security and military confidence-building measures (CBM). For its own part, Washington should reconsider the U.S. policy of selling arms to Taiwan. With war across the strait having become a more remote possibility, there is—as Timothy Keating, commander of the U.S. Pacific Command, observed—“no pressing, compelling reasons for, at this moment, arms sales to Taiwan.”⁵ In short, minimizing or downgrading the military dimension in the Washington-Beijing-Taipei trilateral interaction might be an unconventional but more

⁵ “US Admiral Acknowledges Arms Sales Freeze on Taiwan,” Agence France-Presse, July 16, 2008.

effective measure conducive to establishing a healthy balance in cross-strait relations in particular and hence in Sino-U.S. relations in general.

Furthermore, if sustainable peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait is the long-term goal of U.S. policy, to merely maintain a military balance across the strait is insufficient to accomplish this end. The United States must move beyond a balance mentality and recognize the arrival of a new era in cross-strait relations. First of all, maintaining a balance should not be understood as the same as maintaining a static status quo in cross-strait relations. Former assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs James Kelly once said that the status quo in the strait should be defined by the United States rather than by either Beijing or Taipei.⁶ When tension across the Taiwan Strait is high and there is no direct contact between mainland China and Taiwan, Washington's ability to define the status quo tends to be high, given the United States' role as a balancer and arbitrator between the two sides. Yet now that cross-strait relations have improved and multiple channels of interaction between the two sides have begun to open up and become institutionalized, the status quo is more dynamic, with both Beijing and Taipei possessing a greater voice in defining the status quo. This development has evidently caused some anxiety among China and Taiwan watchers in Washington, who now perceive Beijing as gaining too much influence over Taiwan.

This worry, however, may not be warranted. First, on balance Taiwan still enjoys the more favorable position. In terms of economic and personnel exchanges, Taiwan still sends considerably more goods and people across the strait than does China. In political terms, as a vibrant democracy, Taiwan has comparatively more soft power. Second, as the past 30 years have shown, closer economic and other functional relations between the mainland and Taiwan do not necessarily increase Beijing's influence or ability to "swallow" Taiwan. Economic integration in the case of bilateral relations does not automatically lead to political integration. Rather, the political future of relations must be negotiated, with Beijing and Taipei on equal footing. Finally, even if imbalance does occur and the mainland's influence over Taiwan grows, Washington has no grounds to oppose this imbalance as long as it takes place in a peaceful and voluntary manner. Moreover, such a development will not necessarily be detrimental to U.S. interests in the region because maintaining a sound relationship with the United States should still remain Beijing's top priority.

⁶ James A. Kelly, "Overview of U.S. Policy Toward Taiwan," testimony before the House International Relations Committee, Washington, D.C., Apr. 21, 2004.


Also important for maintaining a healthy balance is that China not interpret every U.S. effort to maintain a balance as Washington's intention or excuse to keep the two sides across the Taiwan Strait separate permanently. Many in China, however, possess a deep-rooted suspicion that the United States, and for that matter Japan, does not want to see the eventual unification of the mainland and Taiwan even by peaceful means. Given the pervasiveness of this perception in China, U.S. policymakers must work to address this concern. Sooner or later the United States and China will need to move beyond the issue of balance to instead reach a strategic understanding regarding the future relationship between the mainland and Taiwan.

The standard U.S. position on the resolution of the Taiwan issue over the years has been that the United States is only concerned with the process, not the result, in cross-strait relations: as long as the process is peaceful, the United States is willing to accept any outcome.⁷ If that is truly the case, one sees no compelling reason why Washington cannot be more proactive in encouraging and promoting national reconciliation across the strait. In this regard, Admiral Keating's offer to provide a good office for meetings between the People's Liberation Army and Taiwan military is a positive move in the right direction. Of course, it might still be too difficult politically for Washington to publically support China's peaceful unification, as Beijing has requested in the past. It is not unthinkable, however, that the United States might recognize the legitimacy of some form of future political union between the mainland and Taiwan. An emerging superpower that is denied its most cherished national aspiration is unlikely to live with the world in peace. As strategist Thomas Barnett has pointed out, the United States should not try to "fight the inevitable": Taiwan most likely will join China in an economic and possible political union, and U.S. strategy "isn't to prevent that integration but to help steer it, to the extent we can."⁸

By the same token, a sustainable cross-strait peace will also require Beijing and Taipei to find at least the minimum level of consensus between both governments regarding the future of bilateral relations. To accomplish this, political leaders on both sides of the strait will need to get out of the

⁷ As former deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Susan Shirk observed, the United States has no problem with the unification of the mainland and Taiwan as long as this is achieved through peaceful means. Other senior government officials in the past on various occasions have also expressed the view that the United States has no intention or desire to separate Taiwan from the mainland or have an independent Taiwan. "Susan Shirk: Cross-Strait Peaceful Exchanges Do Not Need the United States to Play a Role," *China Times*, May 7, 2008; and Chris Cockel, "U.S. Central to Peace in Taiwan Strait, Says Wolfowitz," *China Post*, May 7, 2002.

⁸ "Locking in China at Today's Prices," *Time*, China Blog, August 30, 2007 ~ http://time-blog.com/china_blog/2007/08/locking_in_china_at_todays_pri.html.

mindset of relying on the United States as a balancing force against the other side. Both Beijing and Taipei should aim to make the United States a positive rather than negative factor in cross-strait relations. Doing so will require flexibility and farsightedness on both sides. On the other hand, though it is true that the future of the bilateral relationship is largely in the hands of China and Taiwan, for historical and geopolitical reasons Beijing and Taipei should also take U.S. strategic interests and concerns—such as the issue of imbalance—into consideration when they do strive to reach a peace accord. Whatever deal Beijing and Taipei may eventually strike regarding their future relations, the deal will be more effective, legitimate, and lasting with Washington’s blessing. 

A Longitudinal Examination toward Understanding What Constitutes a Healthy Approach to Balance in the Taiwan Strait

J. Bruce Jacobs

What constitutes a “healthy” balance in cross-strait relations? This essay seeks to shed light on this question by examining the relationship between Taiwan and China over key historical periods. Because Taiwan is already de facto independent (and has been for many years) and because Taiwan does not threaten China, this essay argues that the best way to balance military capabilities across the strait is for China to reduce substantially its national military expenditures.

Back to First Principles

Although China claims the “reunification” of Taiwan with China is a “fundamental interest” (*genben liyi*),¹ we should remember that neither the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) nor the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, or KMT) even claimed Taiwan until 1942.² In his July 16, 1936, interview with Edgar Snow, which the CCP repeatedly vetted before publication, Mao Zedong clearly stated, “we will extend them [the Koreans] our enthusiastic help in their struggle for independence. The same thing applies for Formosa.”³ Thus, despite the use of “historical” argumentation, the claim for Taiwan is very modern for both the CCP and the KMT.

China now uses false history and racial claims to assert “Taiwan is an inalienable part of China.”⁴ In its argumentation, China today obscures the real status of the Qing Empire and claims the empire was Chinese: “In April 1895, through a war of aggression against China, Japan forced the Qing government to sign the unequal Treaty of Shimonoseki, and forcibly occupied

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¹ Taiwan Affairs Office and the Information Office of the State Council, *The One China Principle and the Taiwan Question* (Beijing, February 21, 2000), foreword, available at <http://english.people.com.cn/features/taiwanpaper/taiwanb.html>. For the Chinese-language version, which is clearer, see *Yige Zhongguo de yuanye yu Taiwan wenti*, available at <http://www.china.com.cn/ch-book/taiwan/itaiwan.htm>.

² Alan M. Wachman, *Why Taiwan? Geostategic Rationales for China's Territorial Integrity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 69–99.

³ Edgar Snow, *Red Star over China* (Black Cat, 1938; repr. New York: Grove Press, 1968), 96. This paperback edition is a reprint of the original 1938 version. Snow outlines the procedures of the interviews and argues, “because of such precautions I believe these pages to contain few errors of reporting.” Snow, *Red Star over China*, 91.

⁴ See *The One China Principle*, section 1 (for the Chinese-language version, see *Yige Zhongguo*).

Taiwan.”⁵ In fact, China—like Taiwan—was at the time a colony of the much greater Manchu Empire.

Before the arrival of the Dutch in 1624, Chinese never went to Taiwan other than for short trips to fish or buy products from Taiwan’s aboriginal population; no Chinese community existed on Taiwan at that time. It was the Dutch colonial regime in Taiwan (1624–62) that began importing Chinese to the island. The successor regime of Zheng Chenggong (Koxinga) and his descendants (1662–83) never intended to “restore the Ming,” given that the last Ming pretender had died in 1661 before the Zheng family took control of Taiwan. Rather, the Zheng family inserted themselves into the Dutch colonial structure and “with the status of an independent nation conducted foreign relations with Japan, Holland, Spain, England and other countries.”⁶

Almost four decades after conquering China in 1644, the Manchus conquered parts of Taiwan in 1683. This was the first time that any regime in Beijing had controlled even part of Taiwan. At this time China was a relatively small part of the very great Manchu Empire.⁷ In addition, the Manchus ruled Taiwan under procedures quite separate than those under which China was ruled.

In 1895, sixteen years before their fall, the Manchus ceded Taiwan to Japan, who ruled Taiwan via a colonial regime until 1945. The Chinese Nationalists then took over Taiwan and instituted another colonial regime that used the previous Japanese institutional framework. Like the Japanese colonial regime, the Chinese Nationalist regime massacred thousands of Taiwanese early in its rule. Like the Japanese colonial regime, the Chinese Nationalists then imposed a hard-line dictatorship that imprisoned and executed many more Taiwanese. Like the Japanese regime, the Chinese Nationalists systematically discriminated against the Taiwanese. Thus, even though Taiwanese accounted for 85% of the population, under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek and his son Chiang Ching-kuo, no Taiwanese ever held the position of premier and no Taiwanese ever served as minister of foreign affairs, national defence, economics, education, finance, or justice. Nor did any Taiwanese hold a senior military or security position.

⁵ *The One China Principle*, section 1.

⁶ Huang Fu-san, *Taiwan jianshi: maque bian fenghuang de gushi* [A Brief History of Taiwan: A Sparrow Transformed into a Phoenix], 18, available at <http://tc.genedu.fcu.edu.tw/his/94speech/Taiwan%20history.doc>. An English translation was published by the Government Information Office in Taipei in 2005.

⁷ On the role of the Manchus in “Chinese” history, see Edward L. Dreyer, “The Myth of ‘One China,’” in *The “One China” Dilemma*, ed. Peter C.Y. Chow (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 19–36.

In summary, from ancient times to the present, the Han Chinese regimes that controlled the Chinese mainland only controlled Taiwan for four years during the Civil War (1945–49). With the massacre of over twenty thousand Taiwanese following the demonstrations of February 28, 1947, these four years are the saddest in all of Taiwan's history.⁸ Clearly, one cannot use history to claim that “Taiwan is an inalienable part of China.”

China's white paper on Taiwan also makes a “racial” claim that Taiwan belongs to China. Thus, “the people of Taiwan are of the same flesh and blood with us.” This racial claim has appeared in other Chinese texts concerned with Taiwan. The seventh of Jiang Zemin's “Eight Points,” delivered at a Chinese New Year function on January 30, 1995, stated, “Taiwanese compatriots, no matter whether they are from Taiwan province or other provinces, are all Chinese, they are all bones and flesh compatriots.”¹⁰ Hu Jintao's “Six Points” of December 31, 2008, continued to raise racial claims repeating the phrase “bone and flesh compatriots” and discussing how “the compatriots on both sides of the strait share the common destiny of shared blood vessels [*xuemei xianglian*].”

There are immense problems with the use of such racial logic in international affairs. It suggests that China has claims to any area in which substantial numbers of so-called racial Chinese live. Thus, this logic suggests that China can claim countries such as Malaysia and Singapore in addition to Taiwan. The last major world leader who made similar claims was Hitler prior to his invasion of the Sudetenland on October 1, 1938.

Ironically, modern genetics tell us that the Han Chinese are not one people tied by unique “bones and flesh” or “shared blood vessels.” Rather, “China's dominant ethnicity, the Han, is actually two genetically distinct groups, the northern and the southern Han.”¹¹

This brings us back to our policymakers, who are neither historians nor geneticists. Most have uncritically accepted the arguments of China and the similar arguments put forward by Taiwan's former authoritarian Chinese Nationalist colonial rulers. As Taiwan democratized under President Lee Teng-hui and as the process continued under President Chen Shui-bian, Taiwanese began to leave behind the influence of their Chinese colonial education.

⁸ For more details on Taiwan's colonial history, see J. Bruce Jacobs, “Taiwan's Colonial History and Postcolonial Nationalism,” in Chow, *The “One China” Dilemma*, 37–56.

⁹ *The One China Principle*, section 5. The Chinese text states that “the Taiwanese people are our bones and flesh compatriots [*gurou tongbao*].”

¹⁰ Jiang's Eight Points were initially published in *Renmin ribao*, January 31, 1995, 1–2.

¹¹ David Brown, “Genetic Mutations Offer Insights on Human Diversity,” *Washington Post*, February 22, 2008, A5

Thus, in a systematic poll on the self-identity of Taiwanese conducted every six months from June 1992 to the present, the number of people claiming they are only “Chinese” fell from over 26% in June 1992 to about 4% in December 2008, whereas those who said they were only Taiwanese increased from about 17% in June 1992 to over 50% in December 2008. These very significant changes reflect huge changes in self-identification as Taiwan has democratized.¹² Understanding this history and these changes is critical when trying to develop a coherent Taiwan policy.

Properly Attributing Responsibility

Partly because of unfounded accusations from Beijing and partly because U.S. policymakers did not understand Taiwan’s process of democratization and the simultaneous and related processes of decolonization and Taiwanization, both President Lee and President Chen found themselves labelled as “erratic.” In no way does the present author wish to defend either presidency, especially the latter, but we must recognize that such a label was unfair. President Lee quite rightly was indignant at his treatment at Hickam Air Force Base in Hawaii on May 4, 1994. The following year, on June 9, 1995, he gave a very mild speech at his alma mater, Cornell University, that in no way created any problems.¹³ Yet the Chinese attacked President Lee in the most foul language and commenced war games from 1995 until after the 1996 presidential election, while several U.S. policymakers followed this lead and called him a troublemaker.¹⁴ Is it any wonder that President Lee, who had made many efforts to open communications with China, gave up and proclaimed that Taiwan-China relations are a “special state-to-state relationship” on July 7, 1999?¹⁵

Similarly, prior to delivering his first inaugural address on May 20, 2000, with its promise of “five no’s,” President Chen Shui-bian shared the speech with Beijing¹⁶ as well as with Washington. Yet in response Chen was “rebuffed

¹² For the latest chart, see “Changes in the Taiwanese/Chinese Identity as Tracked in Surveys by the Election Study Center, NCCU (1992–2008),” Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, 2008 ~ <http://esc.nccu.edu.tw/eng/data/data03-2.htm>.

¹³ The text of the Cornell speech, entitled “Always in My Heart,” appears in *President Lee Teng-hui’s Selected Addresses and Messages 1995* (Taipei: Government Information Office, 1996), 32–43.

¹⁴ For the language, see J. Bruce Jacobs, “China’s Policies Towards Taiwan,” in *Uncertain Future: Taiwan–Hong Kong–China Relations after Hong Kong’s Return to Chinese Sovereignty*, ed. C.L. Chiou and Leong H. Liew (Aldershot, Brookfield, Singapore, Sydney: Ashgate, 2000), 98–99.

¹⁵ On this phrase, see J. Bruce Jacobs and I-hao Ben Liu, “Lee Teng-hui and the Idea of ‘Taiwan,’” *China Quarterly*, no. 190 (June 2007): 388–90.

¹⁶ Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, *Strait Talk: United States–Taiwan Relations and the Crisis with China* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2009), 264.

repeatedly as China insisted he concede that Taiwan is a part of China.”¹⁷ Beijing answered Chen’s overtures by aiming over 1,300 missiles at Taiwan and proclaiming the Anti-Secession Act on March 14, 2005, which legitimated the use of force against Taiwan.

The Importance of Democracy

Democracy is important to the United States and its allies. Americans, Australians, and others have spent huge resources in lives, health, and wealth trying to make both Iraq and Afghanistan democratic. It is clearly much more efficient to maintain democracy where it already exists rather than try to impose it on perhaps unwilling countries. In Asia, there are only four stable democracies: India, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.¹⁸ As these democracies are both precious and important, one would expect that U.S. and other policymakers would make very clear that they cannot accept these democracies being threatened.

The Presidency of Ma Ying-jeou

Since his inauguration on May 20, 2008, President Ma Ying-jeou has attempted to reduce the tension between Taiwan and China. In doing so, President Ma has implemented two key policies. First, he has declared a “diplomatic truce” (*waijiao xiubing*) with China in which neither Taiwan nor China will seek to win the other’s diplomatic allies. This appears to have worked. During his campaign, Paraguayan presidential candidate Fernando Lugo stated he would establish relations with the People’s Republic of China if elected. However, since his inauguration on August 15, 2008, which President Ma attended, President Lugo has continued relations with Taiwan. During the Ma administration, no other nations have changed their “China” representation either.

Late in 2008, many senior officials in Taiwan stated that they would know if Ma’s diplomatic truce had worked only in May 2009 when they would see how China had treated Taiwan’s application to become an observer in the World Health Organization (WHO). In fact, the WHO invitation to Taiwan appears to overcome Taiwan’s fears. In her letter inviting Chinese Taipei to

¹⁷ Tucker, *Strait Talk*, 253.

¹⁸ For a brief discussion, see J. Bruce Jacobs, “Taiwan and South Korea: Comparing East Asia’s Two “Third-Wave” Democracies,” *Issues & Studies: A Social Science Quarterly on China, Taiwan, and East Asian Affairs* 43, no. 4 (2007), 228.

be an observer at the WHO's World Health Assembly, Dr. Margaret Chan, WHO director-general, addressed the letter to "Dr. Ching-Chuan Yeh, Minister, Department of Health, Chinese Taipei."¹⁹ Although Taiwan would have preferred to have been called the Republic of China (ROC) or Taiwan, the government had made clear that Chinese Taipei—the term used in the Olympics and APEC—would be acceptable. Initially, there was some concern when the Taiwan cases of swine flu were listed under China, but on May 23 the WHO changed its website to remove the Taiwan statistics from China's total. The new note beneath the tabulation of swine flu by country stated, "Chinese Taipei has reported 1 confirmed case of influenza A(H1N1) with 0 deaths. Cases from Chinese Taipei are included in the cumulative totals provided in the table above."²⁰ The related WHO map, also dated May 23, did not have a pointer to Taiwan, but included a similar note about Chinese Taipei being included in the cumulative totals.²¹

Critics say that the WHO still has a secret memorandum with China from 2005 that greatly restricts potential Taiwan participation in the WHO. In addition, the Global Health Atlas of the WHO still lists Taiwan as "China (Province of Taiwan)," though one cannot obtain any statistics for this place.²² But others argue, now that Taiwan is already an observer, countries such as the United States, Japan, and Australia will no longer allow China to obstruct Taiwan's participation in WHO, as international boundaries are irrelevant to the spread of disease. Overall, it appears that President Ma's diplomatic truce has proved reasonably successful.

President Ma's second key policy has been to enhance economic ties between China and Taiwan, which has led to a series of agreements between the two sides. In addition, direct flights now operate regularly across the strait and the numbers of Chinese tourists visiting Taiwan have finally reached their limit of three thousand per day. President Ma has declared that he wishes to sign an economic cooperation framework agreement (ECFA) with China by the end of 2009 or by 2010 at the latest. The problem with this is that no one in Taiwan, including the relevant government agencies, has seen a draft of the ECFA. By indicating an urgency to complete such an agreement, President Ma appears to have unilaterally reduced his bargaining position.

¹⁹ Author's copy of this letter.

²⁰ World Health Organization (WHO), "Influenza A(H1N1) – update 37," Epidemic and Pandemic Alert and Response, May 23, 2009 ~ http://www.who.int/csr/don/2009_05_23/en/index.html.

²¹ WHO, "New Influenza A(H1N1) – Number of Laboratory Cases Reported to the WHO," May 23, 2009 ~ http://www.who.int/csr/don/ah1n1_20090523_8AM.jpg.

²² WHO, Global Health Atlas database ~ <http://apps.who.int/globalatlas/DataQuery/default.asp>.

Another difficulty is that at least some of Taipei's bargaining with China has been on a party-to-party (i.e., KMT-CCP) basis rather than on a government-to-government basis. Many Taiwanese fear that the Ma administration has secretly ceded key political factors such as Taiwan's sovereignty in order to reach the economic agreements. These fears are heightened when, in dealing with China, Taiwan's negotiators fail to use key terms such as "Republic of China," "Taiwan," or even "president" when referring to Ma. President Ma's supporters say that such an approach helps reduce the conflict with China, but on a recent visit to China, Chen Chu, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) mayor of Kaohsiung, mentioned "the president of our central government" and "Taiwan" without suffering any disabilities, raising questions about whether or not the Ma administration's approach is too cautious.

During his presidential campaign, Ma Ying-jeou actually moved considerably toward the position of DPP candidate Frank Hsieh in emphasizing the sovereignty of Taiwan and identification with Taiwan, while ignoring the cross-strait "common market" idea of his vice-presidential candidate, Vincent Siew. Yet, since becoming president, President Ma has moved far beyond his campaign rhetoric toward China. In addition, his inaugural address had a racial appeal that somewhat echoes that of China. The English-language text talked of "our common Chinese heritage" when referring to both sides of the Taiwan Strait, though the Chinese-language text actually said, "the people of both sides belonging to the Chinese race [*Zhonghua minzu*]." In addition, the English text did not include the next sentence, which referred to "the high intelligence [or superior wisdom] of the Chinese race."²³

Underlying this concern is the issue of Taiwan's sovereignty. According to international law established as a result of the Convention on Rights and Duties of States, signed at Montevideo on December 26, 1933, Taiwan clearly meets the four criteria of sovereignty: a permanent population, a defined territory, a government, and the capacity to enter into relations with other states. In addition, Article 3 of the Convention makes clear that "the political existence of the state is independent of recognition by other states. Even before recognition the state has the right to defend its integrity and independence."²⁴

²³ For the text in English, see "Taiwan's Renaissance," President Ma's Inaugural Address, Office of the President website, Republic of China (Taiwan), May 20, 2008 ~ http://www.president.gov.tw/en/prog/news_release/document_content.php?id=1105499687&pre_id=1105499687&g_category_number=145&category_number_2=145, section 2. For the text in Chinese, see "Zhonghua minguo di 12 ren zongtong jiuzhi yanshuo," Office of the President website, Republic of China (Taiwan), May 20, 2008, 8 ~ http://www.president.gov.tw/1_president/97speak/97speak1.pdf.

²⁴ *Convention on Rights and Duties of States* (December 26, 1933), available at ~ <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/intdip/interam/intam03.htm#art3>.

Unfortunately, over the years and during his presidency Ma seems to have shifted ground several times on the issue of Taiwan's sovereignty. During his presidential campaign, Ma stated clearly that Taiwan, which he sometimes called the ROC, is a sovereign country. In his inauguration speech, however, he stated, "the keystone for a final solution to the cross-strait problem is not in a conflict over sovereignty, but in ways of life and core values."²⁵ A year later, in a press conference on May 19, 2009, President Ma stated that the sovereignty of the ROC belongs to the people. Ma further said, "Taiwan is the ROC... We should clear this up from a historical and constitutional viewpoint. The public must not be confused into thinking Taiwan's sovereignty is undefined."²⁶ Unfortunately, his presidential spokesman then modified this statement by adding a Chinese character that changed the meaning to "Taiwan is part of the Republic of China."²⁷

Dealing with China

In discussing the Taiwan question with China, the first point the United States and other countries need to make clear is that Taiwan of the 1970s and Taiwan today are not the same. Taiwan is no longer under a Chinese colonial government and has no wish to be. As a democratic country with a larger population than two-thirds of the members of the United Nations, Taiwan has a right to be heard. If today England were to claim India, or France were to claim Algeria, we would ignore such claims.

Second, China is an important world power militarily, politically, and economically. The United States and other countries need to cooperate with China to solve a host of international problems including North Korea, climate change, and the world economic crisis. But such "need" is a two-way street. These problems also face China and such cooperation is "win-win." The interests of others do not need to be sacrificed to gain such cooperation.

Finally, Zhu Feng, one of China's international relations academics who is well-connected to the government, recently argued that China requires a substantial military "solely" because of Taiwan:

²⁵ The quotation is from the Chinese text, "Zhonghua minguo di 12 ren zongtong jiuzhi yanshuo," 8 ~ http://www.president.gov.tw/1_president/97speak/97speak1.pdf, 8. The official English translation was less clear and pointed.

²⁶ Ko Shu-ling and Rich Chang, "Ma Defends His Administration," *Taipei Times*, May 20, 2009, 1 ~ <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2009/05/20/2003444068>.

²⁷ *Ziyou shibao* [Liberty Times], May 20, 2009 ~ <http://www.libertytimes.com.tw/2009/new/may/20/today-p1-2.htm#>.

China's sense of insecurity is clear given U.S. geopolitical primacy and Washington's security commitment to Taiwan for peaceful settlement of the cross-Strait dispute....To be a great power, furthermore, China needs robust military deterrence against Taiwan's independence movement....Based solely on the Taiwan issue, then, Beijing must strengthen its ability to counter U.S. capabilities—otherwise, China will [be] incapable of preventing Taiwan's independence.²⁸

Building an aircraft carrier for “national pride”²⁹ is a misappropriation of national resources when, according to China's own statistics, 30 million people lack sufficient food and clothing and 60 million more people have an income beneath China's poverty standard of 865 renminbi per year. It should be noted that this standard for poverty is less than one-third the World Bank's poverty standard of \$365 per year. In fact, China's average per capita rural income of \$300 per year is less than the World Bank poverty standard.³⁰ If China could solve this problem of poverty, would it not be a much greater country than if it had an aircraft carrier? ◆

²⁸ Zhu Feng, “TSD—Euphemism for Multiple Alliance?” in *Assessing the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue*, the National Bureau of Asian Research, Special Report, no. 16, December 2008, 43, 44, 47, respectively.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

³⁰ Elaine Kurtenbach, “Gap between China's Rich, Poor Alarming,” Associated Press, September 21, 2005, available from Factiva (in free text field, insert AN=APRS000020050921e19l000pz).

Thinking About a Healthy Military Balance in the Taiwan Strait

Alan M. Wachman

Referring to an array of appliances and vehicles devised to deliver death and decimation as “healthy” seems a bit perverse. However, humanity being what it is, people will continue to build and acquire these devices. One is thus obliged to reflect on the possibility that these weapons may be used, and, therefore, one will want to ensure that their use results in what one perceives to be a desired outcome. It is widely accepted that a certain distribution of devices and conveyances may actually discourage disputants from using what they have. Consequently, how one evaluates what constitutes a healthy balance of forces depends on whether one’s aim is to employ fierce modes of destruction to kill and demolish or whether one is thinking of armaments principally in terms of what might be called a destructive derivative: deterrence.

Views of what constitutes a healthy military balance across the Taiwan Strait will differ depending on the objectives one emphasizes as paramount and on the strategy one adopts as most efficacious in service to those objectives. Naturally, the governments of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Republic of China (ROC), and the United States—the three states most enmeshed in the military dimension of the cross-Taiwan Strait controversy—act in what they each perceive to be their own national interest. Therefore, it is unsurprising that each state emphasizes different objectives and espouses competing views about an appropriate distribution of military forces while trying to affect the balance across the strait. Beyond that, one discerns within each of those three governments—to say nothing of what emerges from the broader gaggle of pundits in each of the three places—contending visions of what the paramount objective ought to be and, therefore, distinct visions of what constitutes a healthy military balance. Thus, what one prescribes as a healthy balance of military forces affecting the Taiwan Strait will reveal what one’s political objectives are and what role one imagines for the use of military power.

At present, the PRC appears to have reached a juncture where it hopes the firepower it has developed will deter people on Taiwan from pursuing the amorphous objective known as “de jure” independence—even though there is no standard definition of what constitutes de jure independence or

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consensus about how it differs from the state of affairs that already exists. In other words, Beijing apparently believes that military power can intimidate Taiwan's voters and elected officials from acting in too brazen a manner with regard to the assertion of Taiwan's independent status, even though Taiwan is clearly not dependent on the PRC and shows little sign of hoping to become so. What, precisely, Beijing aims to deter seems to vary. Yet, China continues to expand its capacity to menace Taiwan, leaving some observers to conclude that Beijing's long-range goal may be to acquire the capacity to alter Taiwan's status by force. There is also reason to believe that the PRC views the expansion of its military capabilities as having a deterrent effect on the United States or on other states—principally Japan—that might be tempted to engage in hostilities, should combat arise between the PRC and the ROC.

For its part, the ROC is at a juncture where it hopes very much that the firepower it has and still hopes to acquire will give Beijing sufficient pause that it will refrain from attacking the island, or that if the PRC decides to use force for something other than deterrence, Taiwan could blunt an assault for a period of sufficient duration that U.S. military power may be brought to bear on the conflict. Although the ROC once had the intention of using military capabilities to alter the political status of the PRC, those aims were shelved long ago and formally extinguished in 1991. Chen Shui-bian's administration adopted a strategy of developing long-range missiles capable of striking targets well within the mainland, but the Ma administration has abandoned that approach to defense.¹ Now, the military power of the ROC is considered primarily as an elaborate system of speed bumps, greatly complicating any drive by the PRC to defeat Taiwan by force of arms but hardly adequate to halt a determined PRC.

It looks, therefore, as if Beijing sees armaments as a way of limiting political change emanating from Taiwan, whereas Taiwan seems to view armaments as a way of limiting military harm done by the PRC and buying time until the United States, like the cavalry in cowboy movies of an earlier era, can ride in over the horizon. While Beijing has numerous other military ambitions beyond the question of Taiwan's status that impel the expansion of armed forces, Taiwan has no adversary other than the PRC and far more limited aims for the employment of military power. This alone complicates the effort to assess a healthy military balance because not only is the use of force in the bilateral dispute viewed differently in Beijing and Taipei, but

¹ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2009* (London: Routledge, 2009), 365.

the forces that Beijing might employ in hostilities with Taiwan cannot all be meaningfully distinguished from capabilities that the PRC may be developing for other purposes.²

An even more confounding factor is that a conventional approach to the question of military balance across the Taiwan Strait accounts only for the forces of the PRC and the ROC. Those states are, after all, the principal disputants. Calculating what is in the arsenals of those two states, analysts have for years been anticipating that the superiority once enjoyed by the ROC would, in “a matter of time,” erode.³ Thus, it is unsurprising that the U.S. Department of Defense asserts that “since 2000, the military balance in the Taiwan Strait has continued to shift in Beijing’s favor.”⁴ In both places, however, considerations of military conflict resulting from the dispute over Taiwan’s status entail an assessment of the force that could be brought to bear by the United States and an evaluation of the political will in Washington to commit those forces. Consequently, as one thinks about an appropriate balance of forces affecting the Taiwan Strait, excluding the United States would be unduly pedantic and, frankly, of little practical utility.

In its annual report to Congress for 2009, the Department of Defense makes clear that “the security situation in the Taiwan Strait is largely a function of dynamic interactions among Mainland China, Taiwan, and the United States.”⁵ The report also states that “China does not yet possess the military capability to invade and conquer the island, particularly when confronted with the prospect of U.S. intervention.”⁶ The role of the United States is therefore obviously a factor any assessment of a military balance must encompass. Yet, in explicit references to the military balance, the conventional approach only compares—as the Pentagon’s own report does—the military power of Beijing and Taipei.⁷

Given that neither Beijing nor Taipei excludes the potential role of the United States from their own military planning, considering the capacities of the United States as one tallies up the military balance seems only sensible,

² Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Andrew Scobell, eds., *Beyond the Strait: PLA Missions Other than Taiwan* (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, April 2009).

³ David L. Shambaugh, “A Matter of Time: Taiwan’s Eroding Military Advantage,” *Washington Quarterly* 23, no. 22 (Spring 2000): 119–33.

⁴ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military Power of the People’s Republic of China 2009* (Washington, D.C., 2009), viii.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁷ See “Figure 15. Taiwan Strait Military Balance, Ground Forces”; “Figure 17. Taiwan Strait Military Balance, Air Forces”; and “Figure 19. Taiwan Strait Military Balance, Naval Forces” in *Ibid.*, 60, 62, 64.

even if the prevailing practice has been to deal with U.S. forces as if they were ancillary to the military balance.

Thinking about the military balance from the vantage of the United States, one can see that the greater the capability of the PRC, the greater must be the capacity for countervailing force in the linked hands of Washington and Taipei. There are both political and strategic implications, though, for how military forces are apportioned to the United States and Taiwan. Like the PRC, the United States has a wide range of potential uses for its military power. So, it is not the case that the full range of U.S. power will necessarily be viewed by the PRC as exclusively tied up in the cross-Taiwan Strait dispute. Beijing is, however, likely to view Taipei's entire arsenal as an outgrowth of its wish to resist unification on Beijing's terms. In sum, the United States can continue to maintain a robust military presence in the Pacific and even enhance elements of its arsenal without Beijing necessarily concluding that the forces are intended solely to affect a cross-Taiwan Strait controversy. Taiwan cannot.

Two pressing questions, then, are (1) how much armament is enough and (2) what, specifically, should Taiwan have? The answer to both questions depends on how Taiwan plans to use its armed forces—a question that has been vigorously debated in Taipei.

In February 2008, just weeks before being elected president, Ma Ying-jeou stated his view:

Many members of the DPP elite have said publicly that to deter a Mainland invasion Taiwan should develop the ability to strike at the heart of Mainland China's military capability. They want "offensive weapons." We cannot approve of this plan of action. "Offensive defense" is not only infeasible but also dangerous... because it would invite foreign intervention, or even a preemptive strike by Mainland China.

In contrast to the aggressive, provocative, and destructive strategy of national defense offered by the DPP, we advocate establishing a hard ROC defensive stance by building an integrated defensive capability that will make it impossible to scare us, blockade us, occupy us, or wear us down... We believe that Taiwan's defensive stance should be to arm and armor ourselves only to the point that the Mainland cannot be sure of being able to launch a "first strike" that would crush our defensive capacity and resolution immediately.⁸

⁸ Ma Ying-jeou, "A SMART Strategy for National Security" (speech before the Association for the Promotion of National Security, Republic of China, February 26, 2008) ≈ <http://www.taiwansecurity.org/TS/Ma-SMART.htm>.

Ma's views seem consistent with those articulated by William S. Murray, who proposes that Taiwan adopt a "porcupine strategy," a view that has become the focal point of debate. Murray writes:

Taipei can no longer expect to counter Chinese military strengths in a symmetrical manner...Taiwan must therefore rethink and redesign its defense strategy, emphasizing the asymmetrical advantage of being the defender, seeking to deny the People's Republic its strategic objectives rather than attempting to destroy its weapons systems. This would enable Taipei to deter more effectively Beijing's use of coercive force, would provide better means for Taiwan to resist Chinese attacks should deterrence fail, and would provide the United States additional time to determine whether intervening in a cross-strait conflict was in its own national interest.⁹

The Ma administration appears to have embraced much of Murray's approach, revealing a shift in emphasis in Taiwan's first-ever Quadrennial Defense Review.¹⁰ However, Murray's rationale and the transition envisaged by President Ma are by no means universally accepted in Taiwan.¹¹ It should not be surprising that the implementation of the strategy has been affected by the democratic process—with some constituencies advocating for greater defensive measures that would absorb and survive an attack as a means of signaling to Beijing that attacking the island would be futile, and others arguing for greater offensive capabilities as a means for Taiwan to deter an attack or retaliate if attacked.

Of greater consequence is the fact that in the United States there is no consensus about what objectives ought to be paramount where Taiwan is at issue. Considering the question of what constitutes a healthy military balance, then, prompts one to differentiate related, but distinct, views of U.S. objectives.

Should the United States continue to act in strict accordance with the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), which characterizes the interest of the United States as maintaining the "peace, security, and stability in the Western Pacific" and "to consider any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including by boycotts or embargoes, a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United

⁹ William S. Murray, "Revisiting Taiwan's Defense Strategy," *Naval War College Review* 61, no. 3 (Summer 2008): 13, 15.

¹⁰ Ministry of National Defense, Republic of China, *Quadrennial Defense Review, Republic of China 2009* (Taipei, 2009) ~ <http://www.mnd.gov.tw/QDR/file/english.pdf>.

¹¹ Tsung-chi Yu, "Taking National Defense Seriously," *Taipei Times*, November 13, 2008, 8 ~ <http://www.taipetimes.com>; and Michael M. Tsai, "An Assessment of Taiwan's Quadrennial Defense Review," *China Brief* 9, no. 8 (April 16, 2009) ~ <http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief>.

States”?¹² That is, should Washington stay the course, looking back on 30 years without cross-strait bloodshed as reason enough to refrain from tinkering significantly with U.S. policy?

Or should the United States pursue even more specific goals, such as those advocated by the United States-China Economic and Security Review Commission? Reflecting a sentiment often encountered in U.S. policy circles, the commission writes that “the United States has an important interest in ensuring the survival of a democratic government in Taiwan....It is in the interest of the United States to foster a peaceful resolution of Taiwan’s international status and maintenance of a peaceful status quo until that resolution can be achieved.”¹³ If Washington does seek to advance a “peaceful resolution,” the United States would need to consider how its military posture in the Pacific, and its arms sales to Taiwan that influence the military balance, affect that prospect.

Or should the United States begin to scale back its military commitment to Taiwan in light of the fundamental shift in international circumstances since the TRA was written three decades ago? In 1979 the political and strategic cost—to say nothing of the financial implications—of maintaining a capacity to defend Taiwan was considerably less than it is today. The PRC had nowhere near the military capacities that it does today, nor was its relationship with the United States as complex. The commitment to maintain a capacity to defend Taiwan was a much cheaper one to make then than it is now.

Is the United States to ignore the increasing political, military, and economic costs involved in sustaining commitments made 30 years ago? Is the United States to make no accommodation to the expansion of PRC power and the broadening U.S. interest in a cordial and collaborative relationship with the PRC?¹⁴

¹² *Taiwan Relations Act*, Public Law 96-8, 96th Congress (1979).

¹³ U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2008 Annual Report to Congress*, 110th Congress, 2nd sess., October 28, 2008, Washington, D.C., 262.

¹⁴ Robert Sutter broached these issues by questioning whether a moderation in cross-strait relations should be seen as an invitation to reconsider the role of the United States in this trilateral stand-off. One week later, Richard Bush and Alan Romberg dismissed Sutter’s concern that the PRC may be led by greater military capability to adopt more coercive measures toward Taiwan. Instead, they affirmed their confidence that a failure by Beijing to meet Ma Ying-jeou halfway in forging some accommodation in relations will lead Taiwan’s voters to bring to power in Taiwan a more “fundamentalist” leader and would be “the most powerful instrument to encourage PRC moderation and flexibility.” See Robert Sutter, “Cross-Strait Moderation and the United States—Policy Adjustments Needed,” Pacific Forum, Center for Strategic and International Studies, PacNet Newsletter, no. 17, March 5, 2009; and Richard Bush and Alan Romberg, “Cross-Strait Moderation and the United States—A Response to Robert Sutter,” Pacific Forum, Center for Strategic and International Studies, PacNet Newsletter, no. 17A, March 12, 2009, available at <http://www.pacforum.org>.

The point is that without a clear sense of what the United States aims to achieve, defining an appropriate military balance—in which the U.S. military presence must be a factor—is a fool's errand. Washington must decide first how to prioritize its interest in the absence of hostility in the Western Pacific, a resolution of the cross-strait controversy that might see an accommodation by Taiwan and China, relations and perceptions of U.S. allies and adversaries in the Pacific and beyond, and the broader and multifaceted relationship that the United States has with the PRC. A salutary military balance in the Taiwan Strait, from Washington's perspective, must reflect this prioritization. There is also little point in trying to evaluate a healthy military balance without considering the implications of Japan's strategic interests, defense inclinations, and military capabilities. Whatever armaments Taiwan is allowed to purchase are an adjunct to the force that the United States maintains and, so, should be explicitly calculated in that fashion. The narrow exercise of accounting for what capabilities the PRC has, what the ROC has, and what more would be needed by Taipei to reach its defense-related objectives may necessitate the sort of standard comparison of forces that passes for an evaluation of the cross-strait military balance. It is unlikely, though, that a head-to-head comparison of PRC and ROC arsenals will yield a view of what constitutes a healthy military balance.

The greatest restraint on the use by Beijing of military power in the Western Pacific is not the arsenal of Taiwan but the capacity and political will of the United States. Some analysts have begun to decry what they perceive as the erosion in the military balance in the Pacific region between the United States and the PRC as it affects the possibility of conflict in the Taiwan Strait.¹⁵ Absent that deterrent effect, the military balance will continue to slide ever more precipitously in Beijing's favor, with Taiwan incapable of paying for or integrating the volume of weaponry that would be needed to right the balance.

Unless the PRC and the United States were to evolve in ways that significantly narrow the gap between their separate strategic interests, Beijing and Washington will very likely continue to grope for means of accommodation in some spheres of interaction while hedging against the possibility of conflict in the military arena. Indeed, the very commitment by the United States to seek means of sustaining a preponderance of power in the Pacific that would deter the PRC from using force could itself perpetuate the wish by Beijing to

¹⁵ Wendell Minnick, "RAND Study Suggests U.S. Loses War with China," *Defense News*, October 16, 2008 ~ <http://www.defensenews.com>.

hedge against the possibility of conflict with the United States in the Taiwan Strait.

In other words, the military balance in the Western Pacific may already be characterized by a “security dilemma.” It makes little sense to restrict thinking about the Taiwan Strait to the narrow confines of a tally of Beijing and Taipei’s resources. The greater source of either security or insecurity for Taiwan will reflect not only what weapons and capabilities the island has but, more importantly, the calculus that operates in Beijing and Washington about the salience of the Taiwan issue in the Sino-U.S. relationship. Moreover, it is the nature of the Sino-U.S. relationship that will likely determine the conditions under which “peace, security, and stability in the Western Pacific” can be sustained. ◆

Politics as the Foundation of a Healthy Military Balance

Ji You

Since as far back as the Korean War, Taiwan has been a key issue fostering security concerns and mistrust between Washington and Beijing. Each side has been alert for the possibility of a military confrontation over Taiwan. Barack Obama's remark during his presidential campaign regarding the need to promote a healthy military balance across the Taiwan Strait is thus a welcome development that can broaden the space for Sino-U.S. cooperation to stabilize the status quo in the strait.¹ This approach is much more progressive than the George W. Bush administration's overreliance on the use of military power for achieving political and diplomatic objectives. This military-centric orientation was—and remains—both costly and ineffective as far as the Taiwan conflict is concerned. Together with Obama's advocacy of exercising “smart power” in diplomacy, the concept of maintaining a healthy balance, if properly applied, can help the United States handle the challenge of China's rise by incorporating China into the existing world order. This incorporation is particularly important given the ever-widening military imbalance across the strait that is occurring as the People's Liberation Army (PLA) moves closer to acquiring decisive superiority. On a cautionary note, however, it is not clear whether Washington's new leadership style can be sustained in the midst of mounting security threats, which historically have induced superior powers to consider the use of military pressure as a convenient solution to resolving a crisis.

The Politics of Maintaining a Healthy Balance

In my understanding, the term “healthy” really means a cost-effective and comprehensive way to deal with uncertain challenges. The core of this concept is politics rather than military capabilities. Military balance or imbalance does not cause war—politics does.

In the Taiwan Strait, the original politics of stability was embedded in a tripartite consensus between Washington, Beijing, and Taipei that war must be averted. From this consensus, the strategic framework of the “one China” principle was established in the late 1970s, now more a tacit agreement on

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¹ Interestingly, this thesis has been largely overlooked by China's U.S. specialists.

crisis management than an agreement on competing claims of sovereignty and geography.² Thus, what has prevented war from occurring has not been the issue of military balance narrowly defined but rather the three-way commitment of the United States, China, and Taiwan to this political framework, however differently defined by the parties involved. The heightened cross-strait tension during the eight-year Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) administration in Taiwan arose largely from the party's relinquishment of this framework. When the political equilibrium is upset, military balancing becomes a zero-sum game.

If one sets aside the larger political framework and focuses more narrowly on the nuts-and-bolts of defense weaponry, one quickly comes to the conclusion that there has never been a military balance across the Taiwan Strait. Although Taiwan used to enjoy a qualitative edge in military capabilities, recently the mainland has decisively surpassed Taiwan in force capabilities. Complicating this measure of balance, moreover, is that superior U.S. military power must also be considered in the equation; in a time of war the U.S. factor would significantly shift the balance against the PLA. In comparison to the U.S. military, the PLA is the weaker power and will remain so for a long time to come. A simple one-to-one calculation (i.e., the mainland vis-à-vis Taiwan) does not make good sense in a tripartite relationship.

Politics, therefore, is the main driver in deciding the nature of the interaction among the three parties. Military balance matters but serves the political will of the leaders in each of the three capitals. For example, a newly disclosed official document has revealed that Mao Zedong had a plan to capture Kinmen in 1958, despite the overwhelming combined military superiority of the United States and Taiwan.³ Furthermore, Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian continued to challenge the vital interests of the mainland even as the cross-strait military balance strongly tilted in favor of the PLA.

The Relevance of Maintaining a Healthy Balance

Any attempt by Taiwan to try to maintain a bilateral balance of power in the strait would clearly be in vain. Taiwan is more than a dozen times smaller than mainland China in terms of total GDP and military budget, to name only two factors. In part because Taiwan's military modernization remains

² You Ji, "The Anti-Secession Law and the Risk of War in the Taiwan Strait," *Contemporary Security Policy* 27, no. 2 (August 2006): 237–57.

³ Sun Qimin, *Zhongsu guanxi shimo* [History of Sino-Soviet Relations] (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2002), 341.

somewhat stagnant, the island's military inferiority will grow overwhelming in the next decade or two.⁴ This is why Obama's thesis of a healthy military balance is so relevant for fostering a long-term healthy tripartite relationship.

First, Washington's preference for maintaining the status quo is in agreement both with Beijing's medium-term agenda of opposing *de jure* Taiwan independence and with Taipei's "three no's" policy. This common ground has restored the lost strategic framework and constitutes the foundation for a healthy military balance. Without this political foundation, war would be a constant possibility—even if the military balance is in sharp favor of the United States and Taiwan. As long as this common ground remains upheld, Beijing will be willing to acquiesce to China remaining divided even as it gains substantial force superiority vis-à-vis Taipei. Politics is therefore the critical linkage in trilateral relations, and military power is subordinate.

Second, if the goal of maintaining a healthy military balance is indeed to prevent war, this objective will guide the three parties to work jointly toward security-building in the strait. This scenario may have become possible following the regime change in Taipei last May. The new Taiwan government has de-emphasized the pursuit of a balance of power in favor of the pursuit of a commitment to peace, which will in due time become institutionalized if the current momentum toward tension reduction across the strait continues.

Third, the balance of power is always relative. Efforts to maintain this balance connote an imperative to engage in an open-ended arms race that benefits no party, especially not the weakest. The thesis of a healthy military balance promotes a smart balancing process to hedge against the worst-case scenario of the balance breaking up—without relying exclusively on arms build-ups to deal with threats from the other side. Thus, this approach runs counter to the traditional "action-reaction" arms spiral.

Washington, Beijing, and Taipei all clearly have a stake in seeking a mutually beneficial arrangement to address the issue of military balance. Washington can rest assured that, despite China's increasing military modernization, Chinese strategists believe the 21st century will remain the age of the United States in terms of military power. The United States has unparalleled defense capabilities.⁵ The

⁴ Richard C. Bush, *Untying the Knot: Making Peace in the Taiwan Strait* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2005).

⁵ Military superiority does not, however, prevent U.S. security specialists from questioning whether the United States has achieved a satisfactory level of security. This is probably the biggest irony in the relationship between power and security in human history. See Christopher A. Preble, *The Power Problem: How American Military Dominance Makes Us Less Safe, Less Prosperous, and Less Free* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

China challenge to the United States is that the current U.S. military dominance in absolute terms in the Far East will progressively weaken as the PLA grows more capable in relative terms of inflicting heavy damage on U.S. troops. This will be especially true when China acquires reliable mutually assured destruction capabilities vis-à-vis the United States in one to two decades. For Washington the relevance of the healthy military balance thesis is reflected in PLA Major General Peng Guangqian's argument that even though the United States could destroy China one hundred times with superior U.S. nuclear power, China could claim victory if the PLA could destroy the United States but once.⁶

Here the word "healthy" really means how Washington employs various kinds of power to solicit China's cooperation in cross-strait and world affairs. Possessing a superior military advantage is helpful but should not be used by Washington as the primary leverage to extract Beijing's compliance, a move that would back both countries into a corner. U.S. efforts to maintain a healthy military balance vis-à-vis China would push Washington to rank-order national strategic interests. The United States would need to question the value of entering a major war with another nuclear power when Washington and Beijing both share the political objective of maintaining the status quo in the Taiwan Strait.

Pertinent to this discussion is the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA). The TRA was promulgated in 1979 to convince Beijing that the United States possessed the capability and intent to frustrate any unprovoked attack by China against Taiwan. There is a near consensus in the United States, however, that the likelihood of Beijing launching an unprovoked attack on Taiwan remains extremely low.⁷ Thus, the question is whether Washington has opened the window for the TRA to be manipulated; rather than protect Taiwan against an unprovoked PLA attack, it seems more probable that the act would be invoked because of actions taken by a Beijing forced to respond to a Taiwanese declaration of independence.

As pointed out by Ted Galen Carpenter, the Taiwan problem highlights the danger inherent in Washington's habit of making ill-advised security commitments to small, vulnerable client states that are not crucial to the United States' own security and well-being; in the case of Taiwan, such an obligation could lead to armed confrontation between the United States

⁶ "PLA Generals' View on Sino-U.S. Relations," *Phoenix TV*, June 29, 2004.

⁷ Lin Xu, "U.S. Defense Experts on Cross-Strait Military Situation," *Washington Observer*, no. 12, April 4, 2007.

and China.⁸ Promoting a healthy military balance through a two-pronged strategy of security cooperation and a smart balancing of forces can address the inadequacies of traditional U.S. reliance on hard military balancing.

For its part, the PLA has put much effort toward preparing for asymmetrical warfare against any U.S. military support of *de jure* independence by Taiwan. The military's main thrust has centered on counter-measures against the superior U.S. naval power in the West Pacific, with the goal of accumulating relative stronger capabilities for a limited period of time, in a limited geographic area, and over limited campaign objectives. As a senior PLA officer in the Strategic Missile Force proclaimed, China does not seek to challenge the absolute military dominance the United States enjoys in the region.⁹ The country's overall defensive posture vis-à-vis the United States will not change for a long time to come. Yet in protecting vital national interests, especially in the case of a war to reverse Taiwan independence, China must have effective capabilities to reduce absolute superiority to only relative superiority. This mind-set seems very much in line with the spirit of healthy military balance.

For now, Beijing views the struggle against the *de jure* independence of Taiwan as falling more in the realm of political interaction. Military means would only be the last resort for resolving a crisis situation; the best way of preventing a crisis is still diplomacy. Because both Beijing and Washington see maintaining the status quo as the best avenue to ensuring peace, China seeks cooperation with the United States. In broad terms this cooperation has taken the form of Beijing's pledge not to challenge U.S. global leadership and not to exclude Washington in regional affairs.

Ma Ying-jeou's electoral victory in March 2008 has made this cooperation easier. Ma's "three no's" policy is in alignment with Beijing's priority to avert war in the strait in order to concentrate on China's domestic development. Strategically, the Ma administration is creating the opportunity to deprive cross-strait relations of the trigger for war. Ideally this "de-warization" between Beijing and Taipei will gradually free Sino-U.S. relations from any chance of military confrontation. Most strategists in both countries concur that Taiwan is the only spot where the two major powers would fight a war

⁸ Ted Galen Carpenter, *Smart Power: Toward a Prudent Foreign Policy for America* (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institution, 2007).

⁹ "Getting Closer to the Second Artillery Force," *Phoenix TV*, April 12, 2009.

with each other.¹⁰ If the threat of war is removed from cross-strait relations, this can help drastically reduce the military confrontation aspect of the Sino-U.S. relationship. Beijing and Washington would then have a much larger space for security cooperation.

More importantly, demilitarized Sino-U.S. relations would serve as a good platform for the practice of Obama's healthy military balance idea. A declared political commitment to reducing tension would lessen China's worry about being the inferior party in the military equation. The lack of a substantial reason to go to war with China would also address Washington's concern regarding China's rising military power. The hedging strategy would oblige the Pentagon to maintain a general level of military superiority vis-à-vis the PLA, but U.S. military readiness would stay short of battlefield application. In a way, the concept of maintaining a healthy military balance allows the three parties to plan and stabilize their long-term relations with each other.

Conclusion: The Necessity of Healthy Cross-Strait Military Interaction

The cross-strait military balance has gone forever beyond the stage of relative parity. Though a healthy military balance based on political reconciliation cannot be literally achieved any time soon, non-hostile military interaction can, if driven by the emerging bilateral consensus on de-warization. Pushed personally by Hu Jintao and Ma Ying-jeou, this consensus would gradually be translated into phased positive military contacts. In due time, the fear of war and the willingness to avoid war might be institutionalized, starting from dialogues of building military trust. Today the two militaries' exploration of confidence-building measures (CBM), something long considered unattainable, is no longer academic.¹¹ Such exploration is happening, with a pace beyond our initial imagination. A roadmap is now being drawn at the operational levels, and before long semi-official and even official contacts at the working levels will begin. According to the spokesman of the Taiwan Affairs Office, actual contact can be initiated by retired senior military officers entrusted by decisionmaking circles, and then continued both by think-tank strategists with access to top leaders and by actively serving researchers from military institutions. In various workshops in Beijing and

¹⁰ James Thomson, "U.S. Interests and the Fate of Alliances," *Survival* 45, no. 4 (February 2003): 214; and Yan Xuetong, "Reasoning for Containing Taiwan Independence through Use of Force," *Zhanliu yu guanli*, no. 3 (2004): 1.

¹¹ For an analysis of the discussion on cross-strait confidence building measures, see Bonnie Glaser and Brad Glosserman, *Promoting Confidence Building across the Taiwan Strait* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2008).

Taipei, scholars from both sides have frequently called for the establishment of summit communication channels, and these calls have been supported by officials responsible for cross-strait affairs.

To bring about an end to the state of hostility, absolute military balance is not required. Political assurance is the core of a healthy military balance. Ironically, reconciliation may be reached relatively more easily when military balance shifts in China's favor because manageable PLA superiority could prove effective deterrence to *de jure* independence. Cross-strait interaction has moved in this direction since last May. In the meantime, Taipei and Beijing have put in place other positive measures to consolidate the trend of *détente*, such as economic integration, enhanced personal contacts, and formal agreements in managing administrative matters concerning cross-strait exchanges. ◆

At the Core of U.S.-China Relations

Nancy Bernkopf Tucker

U.S.-China relations are never as good or as bad as they seem and rarely do they remain long at any imagined peak or nadir. One of the few constants in the changing dynamic—vital to judging the depth and breadth of relations—is the issue of Taiwan. The contention over Taiwan’s status and future circumscribes prospects for peace and mutual benefit between the United States and China. This issue necessitates interaction but undermines cooperation. It demonstrates the vast differences of vision and practice between the two powers in political, economic, and security affairs. Even as Washington and Beijing work together on vital issues such as international finance, law enforcement, climate change, counterterrorism, and North Korean nuclear proliferation, Taiwan remains at the core of the relationship, ensuring mistrust and suspicion.

If Taiwan had become part of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, confrontations between Washington and Beijing would have been fewer and the opportunities for reconciliation and cooperation far greater. Progress on contemporary problems would be easier. The Cold War determined initial policies and practices. The United States opposed “Red China” and supported the “Free Chinese” in the context of the ideological competition then defining the world community. When the United States and China began to normalize relations in the 1970s and Washington suddenly had more Communist friends than did Moscow, the place of Taipei rapidly eroded. Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S.-Taiwan-China triangle has been both more and less critical, more and less of an obstacle to crafting what successive administrations in Washington have termed a positive, constructive, candid, cooperative, and comprehensive U.S.-China relationship. By the 21st century, the original alignments would most probably have vanished except for the flourishing of democracy in Taiwan.

Today Washington remains committed to good relations with both Beijing and Taipei even as the context and attributes of those relationships have changed. U.S. statesmen traditionally argued that they wanted a strong

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and united China friendly to the United States. The Chinese have often been skeptical of this claim—whether because of 19th-century imperialist interference in the country’s affairs or owing to a more recent belief that Washington sought to contain China. The 21st century is the first time in the modern era that the United States has needed to contend with a powerful and influential Chinese state that must be consulted on a range of regional and global issues. For both Washington and Beijing, this demands a change in attitude and policies; it necessitates an approach mindful of history, attuned to cultural and political sensitivities, and flexible enough to tolerate unprecedented types and degrees of accommodation. The American and Chinese people have barely begun to adjust to this new reality.

U.S. policymakers also face a changed situation as China’s growing political, economic, and military might renders Taiwan’s status ever more precarious. China always had preponderant size—in numbers and geography—but now the country possesses increasing military advantage and economic leverage. Beijing does not want to attack the island and may not yet be convinced of its ability to do so—although its determination if provoked is clear. But time is on China’s side, as its military modernization continues and with Taiwan lacking the resources, manpower, and possibly the determination to compete. Crucial in this regard is the degree of rhetorical and actual support from the United States. Washington’s intercession raises the stakes for China politically and economically, even apart from any use of U.S. military force. Yet the degree of U.S. engagement and Washington’s ability and willingness to provide Taipei with economic and security ties that bolster Taiwan’s position are changing. In trade and investment, Taiwan businessmen have demonstrated the inevitability and dominance of Chinese solutions. Taiwan in theory could surmount some pressure by dispersing its holdings and markets and innovating in new industries at higher levels of technology. Taiwan is trapped, however, by commercial success. The same linguistic and cultural advantages that make Taiwan interests more adept than U.S. firms at exploiting opportunities in China make market shifting less profitable. Finally, China has been increasingly skillful at limiting Taiwan’s international space and in asserting the right to define what that space will be.

Nevertheless, Taiwan’s political system and popular views concerning democratic rights are, if anything, less favorable to China than in the past. The advent of democracy is now an old story, as is the importance of democracy in tying the United States and Taiwan closer together. Although Taiwan’s electorate in 2008 ousted the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party and put in power a government advocating better cross-strait relations,

this outcome did not signify a desire to move toward unification. Strikingly, neither the economic integration of Taiwan and China nor China's developing military might has undermined the public's determination to maintain the political status quo. A solid 80% of the population rejects both independence and unification in the foreseeable future. If the China threat were to disappear and people were free to determine their destiny, the population would opt for independence rather than for unification. Indeed, polling in Taiwan indicates that sentiments against unification and for independence have reached an all-time high.¹ Any change is difficult, however, and government actions not fully supported by Taiwan's people would be impossible. Their determination to decide their future has been pointed out by Richard Bush, former American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) director, and Alan Romberg, a Taiwan specialist at the Henry L. Stimson Center:

Taiwan's democracy will discourage preemptive capitulation.... A change in the legal status of the Taipei government, which unification under any terms would entail, will require amendments to the ROC Constitution, which in turn requires a three-fourths vote in the Legislative Yuan and a super-majority in a referendum. Although the DPP was defeated in the last elections, it still commands...more than enough support to block any constitutional change.²

These new dynamics have real costs for the United States. China's rise and Taiwan's weakness in the context of an unresolved strait stand-off threaten U.S. security. As much as Washington would prefer to focus on broad global issues and cultivate an effective working relationship with Beijing, the rapidly changing Taiwan situation makes misunderstanding, miscalculation, and mistrust unavoidable. Although the United States abrogated its security alliance with Taiwan and has no specific responsibility to protect the island from attack by China's forces, under the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) of 1979 Congress authorized the U.S. government to sell Taiwan weaponry for self-

¹ Mainland Affairs Council polling data from October 2008 indicates that 36.2% of the population favors the status quo now and making a decision later, 25.5% supports the status quo indefinitely, 14.8% favors independence as soon as possible, 12.5% supports the status quo now but independence later, 4.4% favors the status quo now and unification later, and 1.8% favors unification as soon as possible. See "Public Opinion on Cross-Strait Relations in the Republic of China: Unification or Independence? (line chart)," Mainland Affairs Council, October 2008 ~ <http://www.mac.gov.tw/english/index1-e.htm>; and Shiao-chi Shen and Nai-teh Wu, "Ethnic and Civic Nationalisms: Two Roads to the Formation of a Taiwanese Nation," in *The "One China" Dilemma*, ed. Peter C.Y. Chow (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 119, 137-38.

² Richard Bush and Alan D. Romberg, "Cross-Strait Moderation and the United States," Pacific Forum Center for Strategic and International Studies, PacNet, no. 17A, March 12, 2009 ~ http://www.csis.org/component?option=com_csis_pubs/task/view/id,5345/type,3/.

defense.³ Each arms sale is an occasion for Chinese protest and frequently triggers disruptions of military-to-military contacts that are otherwise meant to improve Sino-U.S. understanding. Moreover, under the TRA the United States asserted the intention to be prepared to intervene should the national interest require the country to do so—although there is no explicit commitment to act—making Pacific deployments and reconnaissance missions essential. Accordingly, Washington has sent warships in times of crisis, and Beijing has begun developing military capabilities designed to deter U.S. interference. Beyond the specifics of the TRA, the United States also assists the Taiwan military through training, needs assessments, and advice. Improving relations between Beijing and Taipei could mean that the United States will be safer in the future and that the risk of nuclear war with China will dissipate. Yet Washington might be even more in jeopardy than before.

What will occur has been shaped by history and a legacy of distrust. Taiwan has been dependent on Washington for decades, but the island's behavior has often belied that reality. Taiwan's leaders have put their domestic political requirements and their absorption with China's challenge ahead of the wider policy concerns of Washington; friction between Chen Shui-bian and George W. Bush after September 11, 2001, is only the most recent example. Taiwan's success in manipulating the United States into adopting policies that do not serve the U.S. national interest has been surprising. Similarly, even though Washington always asserts that the United States will not sacrifice Taiwan's well-being in pursuit of U.S.-China cooperation, current political actors in Taiwan need only recall the shock of derecognition to question those assurances. Furthermore, under a policy of strategic ambiguity, first practiced during the Eisenhower administration, Washington has for six decades refused to clarify what circumstances would initiate action, instead only warning China not to attack and Taiwan not to provoke an attack.⁴

Vulnerability comes from events that Washington cannot hope to control. Until now analysts assumed that danger to the United States would arise from China-Taiwan confrontation. Henceforth, trouble could come from Beijing-Taipei efforts to advance reconciliation. Failure of the process is the most dangerous and more likely cause for concern. If Chinese leaders remain hesitant in adjusting to new Taiwan imperatives, then disillusionment

³ For a detailed analysis of the Taiwan Relations Act, see Richard Bush, *At Cross Purposes* (Armonk: ME Sharpe, 2004), 152–60.

⁴ Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, "Strategic Ambiguity or Strategic Clarity?" in *Dangerous Strait: The U.S.-Taiwan-China Crisis*, ed. Nancy Bernkopf Tucker (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 186–211.

in Taiwan, fear of working constructively with Beijing, and pro-independence sentiments could end the current era of compromise. Even as progress has been made on Taiwan president Ma Ying-jeou's cautious agenda for better relations—yielding agreements on direct flights, food safety, and cargo shipping—already it is apparent that Beijing is not fully vested in change. Most significantly, China has not removed any of the missiles that menace Taiwan, and China's 2008 defense white paper released in January 2009, as well as its 2009 military budget, suggests continued coercion.

Alternatively, progress on unification might pose fundamental problems for Washington. Whereas unification is not presently a near-term goal for Beijing or Taipei, developments such as a peace accord, which both sides have discussed, could dramatically alter triangular relations. Uncertainty surrounds such issues as the United States' strategic posture in East Asia, opportunities for U.S. business investment, and the transfer of U.S. military equipment. Although Washington argues that Taiwan is not a geostrategic asset, thereby minimizing the cost of Taiwan's "loss," critics worry about the impact on commercial and military navigation. U.S. businesses might benefit economically as new markets open but might also be excluded from preferential deals. Furthermore, the potential transfer of weapons from Taiwan to China calls into question existing stockpiles and the wisdom of future arms sales.

Washington must also consider the impact on friends and allies of a new Taiwan situation. The Obama administration has emphasized bettering relations with Southeast Asia after discontent developed in the Bush years. Although Southeast Asian states do not want Sino-U.S. friction, and do not necessarily understand or sympathize with Washington's Taiwan policies, these states do want reassurance regarding U.S. constancy and willingness to hedge against China's possible ambitions. Furthermore, U.S. policymakers must take Japan's economic and security interests into account. Japan worries about Taiwan's fate not simply because of the U.S.-Japan alliance and the U.S. need for Japanese support in a cross-strait confrontation. Tokyo does not relish having Taiwan under China's sway and Beijing astride trade and defense sea lanes.

The implications of an end to the Taiwan-China stalemate require greater focus on a U.S. policy response than has heretofore seemed necessary given the multi-decade duration of the Taiwan Strait impasse and the difficulty of imagining a solution. Change will not come tomorrow, but preparation for change is overdue. The Obama administration has officially affirmed long-standing U.S. policy that favors peaceful resolution of cross-strait problems with the assent of Taiwan's people. AIT director Ray Burghardt in March 2009

explicitly pointed to speculation that Washington opposes engagement. “For the United States, this new era of cross-Strait civility is very welcome,” he declared. “With cross-Strait dialogue restored, the danger of miscalculation and confrontation has been greatly reduced.” Furthermore, he asserted, “There’s not a concern that moving beyond economic issues into the political or military realm is threatening to us.”⁵ Some U.S. observers see the prospect as a welcome relief; for others, there is inherent danger.

The new realities dictate that the era of balance across the Taiwan Strait is over. Conditions were far different in August 1982 when Ronald Reagan approved a secret memo defining U.S. policy toward the cross-strait situation. Reagan asserted a principle of military balance between Taiwan and China: “The U.S. willingness to reduce its arms sales to Taiwan is conditioned absolutely upon the continued commitment of China to the peaceful solution of the Taiwan-PRC differences. It should be clearly understood that the linkage between those two matters is a permanent imperative of U.S. foreign policy.”⁶ Furthermore, the memo specified “both in quantitative and qualitative terms, Taiwan’s defense capability relative to that of the PRC will be maintained.”⁷ Today there is no way to preserve a military balance. Diplomacy alone must be responsible for the fate of the region and the world. Barack Obama, Hu Jintao, and Ma Ying-jeou must construct a foundation of transparency and trust that will allow for greater imagination and courage in devising future policies so as not to perpetuate a dynamic that consistently ends in stalemate. This transparency and trust would require open exchange of information, high-level dialogue, forthright acknowledgement of internal political pressure and dedication to making politics stop at the water’s edge, engagement in confidence-building measures (CBM), and avoidance of misunderstanding through better political, societal, and cultural communication.

The difficulties in this recommendation are obvious. Trust and transparency are both in short supply, as demonstrated by a number of recent incidents: the clash between a U.S. ocean surveillance ship and five Chinese vessels (including a naval intelligence ship) near Hainan Island, which caused angry exchanges over U.S. military reconnaissance and permissible activities in China’s exclusive economic zone; China’s denunciation both of

⁵ Raymond Burghardt, American Institute in Taiwan, Press Conference, OT-0906E, March 18, 2009
~ <http://www.ait.org.tw/en/news/officialtext/viewer.aspx?id=2009031901>.

⁶ Ronald Reagan’s secret memorandum on the 1982 communiqué, cited in Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, *Strait Talk: United States-Taiwan Relations and the Crisis with China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 152.

⁷ *Ibid.*

U.S. interference in Tibetan affairs and of the debate in the United States over boycotting the “genocide Olympics” because of Darfur; and China’s vehement objections to U.S. arms sales to Taiwan and the resulting disruption of Sino-U.S. military-to-military consultations. Mistrust is also a chronic problem in U.S. dealings with Taiwan. Conditions have improved with the advent of Ma Ying-jeou and a conciliatory cross-strait policy, but suspicion is close to the surface of a complex relationship in which fundamental interests are not fully aligned. Without mutual confidence between Washington and Taipei, Taiwan will lack the support necessary to be bold in its cross-strait policies. Thus, although the United States remains absorbed in domestic and global recession, wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, nuclear challenges from Pyongyang, violence in Mexico, and dealing with a prickly Russian regime, Washington must find the extra energy and attention that Taiwan requires.

The United States and China will increasingly collaborate in the 21st century because of the many problems requiring multilateral solutions. Talk of an economic group of two (G-2), although widely unpopular internationally, symbolizes the new thrust in Sino-U.S. relations. None of this, however, will be sufficient to prevent a Taiwan crisis, which could overturn all semblance of partnership. No other issue is of similar significance to China, and no other question insinuates the United States so deeply into what Beijing considers its internal affairs. The future of Taiwan will not soon be settled, but neither must continuing uncertainty lead to confrontation and war. Ma Ying-jeou, on the eve of his inauguration, reflected on the demands of his presidency, especially the pressures of the cross-strait dilemma, and declared he felt as though he was “treading on thin ice and standing upon the edge of an abyss.”⁸ The world is standing there with him, and it is essential that the United States, China, and Taiwan be wiser, more cautious, and more creative than they have ever been before. ◆

⁸ Jacques deLisle, “Taiwan under President Ma Ying-jeou,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, E-Notes, June 2008 ~ <http://www.fpri.org/enotes/200806.delisle.taiwanmayingjeoufull.html>.