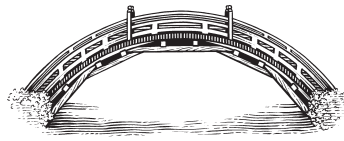


ROUNDTABLE

Defining a Healthy Balance Across the Taiwan Strait



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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).