

“Long-term Trends and Cross-Strait Relations”

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Abstract:

Long-term political, economic, and military trends are reshaping the security environment in the Taiwan Strait in potentially destabilizing ways and undermining the “one China” framework. The United States has become more deeply involved in cross-Strait relations to maintain stability and preserve the status quo, but this approach may not be sustainable.

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The uneasy compromise that has governed Taiwan’s international status since 1972 does not fully satisfy anyone in Taiwan, the People’s Republic of China (PRC), or the United States.¹ Nevertheless, the useful fiction that people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait all accept the “one China” principle has served the core interests of all three parties, producing a reasonably stable security environment that has supported political, economic, and social development in both China and Taiwan. The “one China” framework has allowed the United States to enjoy the economic and security benefits of cooperation with the People’s Republic of China without paying the domestic and international political costs of abandoning Taiwan. The desire to avoid making a painful choice between China and Taiwan has shaped U.S. policy since the early 1970s. This delicate balance is mirrored in the key documents and legislation that govern U.S. policy toward China and Taiwan. The three communiqués explicitly acknowledge the PRC position that there is only one China.² Yet the Taiwan Relations Act also calls for the United States to maintain unofficial relations with Taiwan and make available the defensive weapons necessary to protect Taiwan’s *de facto* independence. Despite the inherent tensions and ambiguities, the result has proved to be a flexible, balanced, and remarkable successful framework for U.S. policy. Policy reviews have repeatedly concluded that the present framework remains the best means of pursuing U.S. interests in both China and Taiwan, largely because major policy changes are viewed as too costly.

Although the “one China” formula has met the minimal needs of political leaders on all three sides for the past thirty years, long-term political, military, and economic trends are gradually eroding the stability of the *status quo*.³ These trends pose new challenges for the continued viability of the “one China” framework. Many are developing relatively slowly, but perceptions of the point at which adverse

¹ For convenience, this article will use the terms People’s Republic of China, PRC, and China interchangeably when referring to China and the terms Republic of China, ROC, and Taiwan when referring to Taiwan.

² Of course, “acknowledging” the PRC position is not the same as “accepting” that position.

trends become intolerable security risks can change abruptly. If political leaders conclude that unfavorable trends will eventually make their position untenable, they may view risky actions to alter these trends as better alternatives than doing nothing. The problem is aggravated by the fact that the governments lack the policy tools necessary to influence (let alone reverse) some key trends. Domestic political incentives have encouraged some actions that may make conflict more likely and inhibited policy adjustments that might reduce long-term dangers.

This article identifies and assesses the potential impact of key long-term trends affecting the security environment in the Taiwan Strait. The types of trends examined include domestic political changes (Taiwan democratization, pluralization in Chinese foreign policymaking), social trends (Taiwan identity, Chinese nationalism), and policy trends (Taiwan's "creeping independence," Chinese efforts to develop a military option, more overt American support for Taiwan). Because policies can be reversed, the emphasis is on policy trends that have persisted for years across changes in political leadership rather than shorter-term policy adjustments. The potential security implications of these trends have not been fully recognized. Much of the writing on cross-strait relations focuses on new developments and is sometimes constrained by policy positions. Of course, short-term developments such as the increased salience of China's cooperation in counter-terrorism and managing the North Korean nuclear issue in the post-9/11 security environment influence policy considerations. But focusing on long-term trends pushes analysis beyond immediate concerns and illuminates deeper forces shaping the cross-strait security environment, providing a more objective starting point for analysis and policy recommendations.

This article examines seven key trends in Taiwan, China, and the United States and two trends that are affecting all three actors:

Trends in Taiwan

³ See International Crisis Group, *Taiwan Strait I: What's left of 'One China'?* (Washington, D.C.: International Crisis Group, June 6, 2003), <http://www.icg.org/library/documents/report_archive/A400992_06062003.pdf>.

More democratic and responsive Taiwan government
Increasing sense of “Taiwan identity”
Taiwan’s “creeping independence”

Trends in China

Increasing Chinese nationalism
More pluralistic Chinese foreign policy process
Chinese efforts to develop a “military option”

Trends in the United States

More overt American support for Taiwan

General Trends

Growing economic integration
Domestic politics increasingly driving foreign policy

Trends in Taiwan

More democratic and responsive Taiwan government

Taiwan’s democratization is not a threat *per se* to stability, but democratization has produced structural changes in Taiwan politics that permit changes in policy toward mainland China that may have destabilizing effects. The most important impact has been to make Taiwan’s government (and reunification policy in particular) more responsive to the concerns of the native Taiwanese who constitute about 75 percent of Taiwan’s population. (Mainlanders who arrived in 1949 make up 15 percent; 10 percent are Hakka, a distinctive sub-ethnic group; and 2 percent are aborigines.) From 1949 to the late 1980s, Taiwan’s political system was dominated by mainlanders who at least rhetorically supported unification with China. Native Taiwanese had only limited opportunities within the political system, and pro-independence views were suppressed. As a result, Taiwan’s democratization movement and the pro-independence movement became closely linked. Native Taiwanese politicians (initially in the *dangwai* (outside the party) movement and later in the Democratic Progressive Party) successfully used the need to redress the political dominance of mainlanders to mobilize support for both

democratization and independence.⁴ Democratization and the recruitment of native Taiwanese into the Kuomintang (KMT) party have gradually reduced the disproportionate influence of mainlanders.

Democratization permits changes in Taiwan's policy toward the mainland, but its substantive impact depends on the preferences of Taiwan voters and the degree to which Taiwan's political leaders feel constrained by these opinions. Opinion polls consistently indicate that a majority of Taiwan voters favor maintaining the *status quo* rather than declaring independence or moving toward reunification. The latest (April 2004) data indicates that approximately 80 percent of those polled support maintaining the *status quo* for the near-term. About half of those polled support maintaining the *status quo* indefinitely or deferring a final decision about Taiwan's status. (20 percent favor independence as the ultimate outcome; 12 percent favor unification as the ultimate outcome; 10 percent do not have an opinion.)⁵ These figures do not necessarily reflect the ultimate preferences of Taiwan voters, since respondents factor in the perceived consequences of movement toward independence (possible war with China) or unification (possible loss of Taiwan's current autonomy).⁶

Although public opinion on Taiwan supports the *status quo*, the degree to which this constrains Taiwan's political leaders is uncertain. Mainlander politicians clearly no longer have the ability to impose reunification upon an unwilling native Taiwanese majority, or even to advocate a reunification policy that does not command popular support. President Clinton's February 2000 statement that any deal on unification would have to have the assent of the Taiwan people explicitly acknowledged the consequences of democratization for any future settlement of Taiwan's status.⁷ Former President Lee Teng-hui and current President Chen Shui-bian have shifted Taiwan's policy away from unification, but

⁴ Alan M. Wachman, *Taiwan: National Identity and Democratization* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1994).

⁵ Mainland Affairs Council, "Unification or Independence?"

<http://www.mac.gov.tw/english/english/pos/9305/9305e_1.gif>, accessed December 3, 2004.

⁶ See Brett Benson and Emerson Niou, "Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: Conditional Preferences on Taiwan Independence and the Security Balance in the Taiwan Strait," working paper, Duke University, October 1, 2003.

⁷ William J. Clinton, "Remarks by the President to the Business Council," February 24, 2000, <<http://hongkong.usconsulate.gov/uscn/wh/2000/022401.htm>>.

have been somewhat constrained in efforts to move toward independence by the need to have a mainland policy that can win popular support.⁸ Both have attempted to finesse the issue by taking symbolic actions to emphasize Taiwan's separateness from China and by attempting to redefine the *status quo* by claiming that Taiwan is already an independent, sovereign country with no need to declare independence.⁹ Chen's fervent appeals to Taiwan nationalism and efforts to redefine the *status quo* produced a narrow victory in Taiwan's disputed March 2004 Presidential election, which Chen won with 50.2 percent of the vote. The contradiction between polling data which indicates 80 percent support for the *status quo* and the fact that a candidate who appears determined to move toward independence won 50.2 percent of the vote illustrates that charismatic politicians have some ability to shape voter preferences and to lead the public in the direction they wish to go. Despite electoral and constitutional constraints, Taiwan's democratic system permits a determined leader to move toward independence in ways that may destabilize the security environment.

China's view that the *status quo* is not an acceptable permanent solution means that even a unification policy that reflects majority opinion on Taiwan may not maintain stability over the long-term. (This was emphasized by a new condition for the possible use of force—indefinite delay of unification—included in China's February 2000 White Paper on Taiwan.)¹⁰ On the other hand, the fact that Taiwan's reunification policy is more closely aligned with public sentiment may eventually force Beijing to recognize that its stated goal of peaceful reunification ultimately depends on its ability to persuade the people on Taiwan that reunification is in their interests. Beijing has regularly accused Taiwan's leaders of leading an unwilling population toward independence. This approach becomes less

⁸ Chen Shui-bian's efforts during the 2000 Presidential campaign to show that he would have a responsible policy toward the mainland was arguable a necessary condition for his electoral victory. Despite his support for referenda and calls for constitutional revision, Chen also felt the need to put forward new policy proposals for improving relations with China as part of his 2004 re-election campaign.

⁹ See International Crisis Group, *Taiwan Strait I: What's left of 'One China'?*, pp. 9-17.

¹⁰ Taiwan Affairs Office and the Information Office of the State Council, "The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Issue," February 21, 2000, <<http://www.china.org.cn/english/taiwan/7956.htm>>.

credible when the actions of political leaders clearly reflect mainstream public opinion. There are indications that Chinese analysts and leaders recognize the need to make unification more attractive to people on Taiwan. However concerns that Chen Shui-bian would take advantage of any concessions to move toward independence suggest that Beijing will place a higher priority on “detering independence” than on “promoting peaceful unification” in its near-term policies.

Increasing sense of “Taiwan identity”

Another important trend is the shift towards increasing consciousness of a Taiwan national identity separate from China. The construction of national identity is a complicated social process that revolves around efforts to create what Benedict Anderson calls an “imagined community.”¹¹ This process is not based on accurate understanding of the historical record, but involves efforts to create the historical myths and political consciousness necessary to bind a people into a distinct nation.¹² Mainlander efforts under KMT rule to impose a Chinese identity through education and national symbols stimulated a backlash by native Taiwanese intellectuals. As a result, many Taiwan nationalists have made a conscious effort to define “Taiwan identity” in opposition to “Chinese identity,” rather than as a supplemental identity (such as the way local Guangdong or Jiangsu identities co-exist with Chinese identity in the PRC).¹³ Taiwan nationalists have consciously sought to reshape school curricula to emphasize Taiwan history, language, and culture at the expense of Chinese history, language, and culture.¹⁴ It is the perceived fusion between a Taiwan national identity and support for independence that makes this trend potentially destabilizing.

¹¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

¹² See Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983) and Daniel Lynch, “Taiwan’s Self-Conscious Nation Building Project,” *Asian Survey*, 44:4 (July/August 2004), pp. 513-533.

¹³ See Wachman, *Taiwan: National Identity and Democratization*, pp. 91-127.

¹⁴ See June Teufel Dreyer, “Taiwan’s Evolving Identity,” in *The Evolution of a Taiwanese National Identity* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, August 2003), pp. 7-8, <http://wwics.si.edu/topics/pubs/asia_rpt114.pdf>.

Shelley Rigger rightly criticizes much of the research on the question of national identity and Taiwan for focusing on national identity as a dichotomous choice between a Chinese identity or a Taiwan identity. As she correctly notes, in much of the research these alternative identities are assumed to be closely correlated with the choices between reunification or independence, missing the majority's preference for political autonomy.¹⁵ Although national identity may be exaggerated as a predictor of preferences for independence or reunification, many PRC analysts believe a correlation exists. They regard consolidation of a distinct Taiwan national identity as a key step towards Taiwan independence and view the de-emphasis of Chinese history and culture in Taiwan classrooms as separatist activity. Chinese analysts and officials hold a dichotomous notion of national identity, viewing Chen Shui-bian's refusal to reaffirm his Chinese identity as a clear indicator of his separatist intentions. If most Taiwan people adopt a conception of identity that is exclusive and non-Chinese, then the prospect of China persuading Taiwan to accept reunification becomes remote. Chinese analysts perceive a growing sense of a separate Taiwan identity as a dangerous and destabilizing trend.¹⁶ Although the percentage of the population identifying itself as "Taiwanese" has doubled (to about forty percent) over the last decade, even more people (including a strong majority of young people) describe themselves as "both Taiwanese and Chinese."¹⁷

The trend toward a separate Taiwan identity poses a difficult challenge for China, because national identity cannot be easily influenced by traditional military or diplomatic means. If China wants

¹⁵ See Shelley Rigger, "Disaggregating the Concept of National Identity," in *The Evolution of a Taiwanese National Identity* and Shelley Rigger, "Social Science and National Identity: A Critique," *Pacific Affairs*, 72:4 (Winter 1999/2000), pp. 537-552.

¹⁶ For an interesting analysis of the Taiwan issue from the perspective of identity, see Perry Anderson, "Stand-Off in Taiwan," *London Review of Books*, 26:11 (June 3, 2004), <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n11/print/ande01_.html>.

¹⁷ For data on self-identification, see Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, "Important Political Attitude Trend Distribution," <<http://www2.nccu.edu.tw/~s00/eng/data/Political%20Attitude.htm>>, accessed December 3, 2004. Yunhan Chu's analysis of polling data on national identity and unification/independence preferences suggests that Taiwanese aged 20-35 are less inclined to adopt an exclusive Taiwanese identity than older Taiwanese and do not have a especially strong preference for independence. See Chu, "Taiwan's National Identity Politics and the Prospect of Cross-Strait Relations," *Asian Survey*, 44:4 (July/August 2004), pp. 484-512.

to influence how people in Taiwan think of themselves, it needs to find positive ways to appeal directly to them. One possibility would be to emphasize a shared ethno-cultural identity between people in China and Taiwan, while acknowledging that people on Taiwan also have a Taiwan identity with distinctive and different characteristics. China could promote positive aspects of Chinese culture that appeal to people on Taiwan (and perhaps even acknowledge its debt to the Republic of China for preserving Chinese cultural artifacts that otherwise would have been destroyed in the Cultural Revolution). Appeals to a shared Chinese ethno-cultural identity might have attraction on Taiwan, since many people think of themselves as having both Chinese and Taiwanese identities. If China proves unable to influence conceptions of national identity on Taiwan, then it is left with the less attractive (and much more dangerous) option of using threats and disincentives to prevent Taiwan's government from acting on a sense of separate identity to push for formal independence. This moves China's policy in the direction of threats and force rather than persuasion.

Taiwan's "creeping independence"

PRC officials and security analysts believe that past president Lee Teng-hui and current president Chen Shui-bian have used salami tactics to move Taiwan toward independence. Actions such as dismantling the Taiwan provincial government and dissociating the government from formal commitments to unification are regarded as steps in a process that might end in constitutional change and a formal declaration of independence. Chinese leaders and analysts believe former President Lee Teng-hui consciously worked to loosen Taiwan's ties with China and to remove or weaken institutional structures and policies that symbolized this linkage. This perception has been reinforced by Lee's subsequent role in founding the Taiwan Solidarity Union (a pro-independence political party) and his embrace of independence as a goal for Taiwan. Lee's "vacation diplomacy" and efforts to increase Taiwan's international profile are regarded as efforts to build international support for Taiwan

independence. This “zero-sum” perception that any international recognition of Taiwan is a step toward independence makes PRC leaders determined to continue diplomatic efforts to isolate Taiwan in every possible international forum.

Chinese suspicions of Chen Shui Bian run even deeper. Chen has long been an advocate of Taiwan independence; the platform of his Democratic Progressive Party includes a call for a referendum on formal independence. Chen’s May 2000 inaugural speech included five specific pledges intended to reassure China, the so-called “four nos and one will not.” Chen declared that “as long as the CCP regime has no intention to use military force against Taiwan,” he would not declare independence, change the national title from the Republic of China, push for inclusion of “special state to state” relations in the constitution, promote a referendum on the question of independence or unification, or abolish the National Reunification Council. Chen referred to these commitments again in his 2004 inaugural address. This conditional pledge of restraint was intended to reassure China, but has had only limited success. Chinese analysts see a pattern of continuing steps toward independence, ranging from small steps such as adding the word “Taiwan” to Republic of China passports to more significant actions such as the passage of legislation authorizing referenda (which might eventually be used for a referendum on independence) and Chen’s push for creation of a new constitution in 2006.

China has stated a few clear “red lines” that would precipitate war, such as a formal declaration of independence. However Beijing has had difficulty formulating responses to “creeping independence.” China typically condemns each individual move, but has not repeated actions such as the use of military exercises involving ballistic missile firings or threats to use force in response to specific actions. This reflects Beijing’s awareness of the high costs of using or threatening to use force, both in terms of international reactions and the negative impact on the Taiwan public’s attitude toward China. Some in Taiwan regard this as evidence that China is bluffing, and believe that Taiwan has considerable room to

push the envelope with further steps toward independence. However actions regarded as innocuous or modest political gestures in Washington and Taipei tend to be regarded in Beijing as part of a slippery slope toward independence. This difference in perceptions increases the possibility of misinterpretation or miscalculation leading to an inadvertent conflict. At some point Chinese leaders may decide that the cumulative impact of Taiwan's small steps toward independence requires a disproportionate response to restore the credibility of Beijing's threats to use force and to stop the trend toward creeping independence before it becomes irreversible.

Trends in China

Increasing Chinese nationalism

One widely discussed trend is the CCP's increasing reliance on nationalism to legitimate its continued rule.¹⁸ As belief in communism has waned due to market reforms and endemic corruption, Chinese leaders have tried to substitute nationalism in order to maintain elite and popular support. Paradoxically, success in obtaining the return of Hong Kong and Macao has increased Taiwan's symbolic importance. Although PRC leaders consciously promote Chinese nationalism as a means of building political support, nationalism also provides Chinese elites with an independent basis for judging their leaders. In this respect, efforts to promote nationalism have increased the political stakes for Chinese leaders of handling the Taiwan issue successfully. PRC analysts claim that any Chinese leader who allowed Taiwan to become independent would find it impossible to remain in power. They also stress that China is prepared to fight over Taiwan even if its chance of victory are low.

Although some argue that rising Chinese nationalism is likely to precipitate a war over Taiwan, there are also limits to the impact of nationalism on Chinese policy. Chinese leaders have often showed restraint in the face of nationalist pressures in order to preserve economic ties with the United States and

¹⁸ Shuisheng Zhao, "Chinese intellectuals' quest for national greatness and nationalistic writing in the 1990s," *China Quarterly*, 152 (December 1997), pp. 725-745.

Japan.¹⁹ Nevertheless, increasing nationalist sentiment could exert a negative influence in a crisis situation, especially if Chinese leaders felt that the survival of the regime (or their personal political survival) required a military response. Widely accepted nationalist goals also allow the Chinese military a means to criticize their political leaders and exert pressure for increased military budgets and hard-line policies toward Taiwan.²⁰ China's political environment is asymmetrical, in that the harshest forms of nationalist criticism are acceptable while more liberal views on the Taiwan issue are often suppressed. This nationalistic policy environment makes creative thinking on alternative policies toward Taiwan difficult and politically risky.

More pluralistic Chinese foreign policy process

An interesting trends in China is a gradual shift toward a more pluralistic foreign policy process.²¹ Because the PRC makes great efforts to present other countries with a unified front on foreign policy issues, this trend is often under-appreciated. Pluralism sometimes appears greatest on issues of least significance, because government censorship (and self-censorship) limits publication of dissident views on sensitive issues such as Taiwan policy. Nevertheless, Chinese foreign policy is now more open to a range of views. Chinese provincial officials and business leaders have a greater role in foreign policy. This influence is arguably greatest on economic issues, and is often expressed in efforts to evade central government policies that affect local economic interests. It is more limited in terms of efforts to shape security policies and sensitive issues such as Taiwan policy. Nevertheless, anecdotal evidence indicates that some companies and provincial officials in Shanghai and Guangdong lobbied Beijing for restrained policies in the midst of the 1995-96 Taiwan Strait crisis.

¹⁹ Erica Strecker Downs and Phillip C. Saunders, "Legitimacy and the Limits of Nationalism: China and the Diaoyu Islands," *International Security*, 23:3 (Winter 1998/1999), pp. 114-146.

²⁰ Nan Li, "PLA Conservative Nationalism," in *The People's Liberation Army and China in Transition*, eds. Stephen J. Flanagan and Michael E. Marti (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2003), pp. 69-89.

²¹ See David M. Lampton, ed., *The Making of Chinese Foreign and Security Policy in the Era of Reform* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001).

While increased pluralism is a moderating influence on Chinese foreign policy, there is another side to pluralism that is the rough analog of democratization in Taiwan. The diffusion of political power in China means that even the paramount leader may not have sufficient stature and authority to unilaterally alter PRC policy toward Taiwan and force other leaders and the military to accept his decisions. Where Mao and Deng could subordinate the Taiwan issue to other Chinese interests (such as establishing strategic relations with the United States or promoting economic development), China's current leaders may lack the stature to take similar actions. The inability of a single leader to dominate the foreign policy apparatus and the military makes new policy initiatives more difficult and inhibits PRC flexibility. This may be one reason why China's policy toward Taiwan still relies heavily on concepts such as "one country, two systems" developed by Deng Xiaoping, even though Chinese analysts recognize that this formulation has little appeal in Taiwan. (China's recent actions to assert its ultimate authority over Hong Kong and to limit movement toward more democratic elections there have further reduced Beijing's credibility in Taiwan.) On balance, pluralism is a positive trend, but it may also allow determined actors (such as the military) to block new policy initiatives toward Taiwan.

Chinese efforts to develop a "military option"

China's ongoing military modernization program is gradually improving PRC power projection capabilities and eroding Taiwan's technological superiority. Over the past decade China has acquired advanced Russian weapons systems such as Su-27 and Su-30 fighters, S-300 surface-to-air missiles, Kilo class submarines, and Sovremenny destroyers equipped with advanced anti-ship missiles. China's own defense industries, which previously produced outmoded weapons, are beginning to produce higher quality weapons that often incorporate advanced foreign technologies. China's expanding coastal deployments of short-range ballistic missiles (now estimated to total about 500 missiles) are also

increasing the PRC's military reach.²² It remains to be seen whether PLA training and maintenance capabilities are advanced enough to employ these advanced weapons effectively. Michael O'Hanlon rightly points out that a conventional invasion of Taiwan is beyond the PLA's current capabilities, and will likely remain that way for a decade.²³ However, the PLA has begun to train more seriously for the possible use of force in a Taiwan scenario.

Over the long run, China's larger economy is likely to provide the resources and technology necessary to shift the military balance decisively in its favor. China's official defense budget has increased dramatically since 1999, while Taiwan's defense spending has declined. In April 2001 the United States offered to sell a range of advanced conventional weapons systems (including destroyers, submarines, and PAC-3 missile defenses), but Taiwan's legislature has been reluctant to allocate money for these weapons, at least in part due to financial constraints. A 1999 Defense Department report concluded that a Chinese military campaign against Taiwan "would likely succeed—barring third-party intervention."²⁴ If the United States is willing to intervene on Taiwan's behalf, then the cross-Strait military balance becomes less important (although the Taiwan military would still need the ability to resist until the U.S. military could arrive in force). The question would then become China's power projection capabilities vs. a combination of U.S. power projection capabilities and Taiwan's own military forces. Conversations with PLA officers suggest that China now assumes that the United States will intervene in a Taiwan conflict; the pattern of PLA acquisitions and training suggests an increasing focus on deterring or delaying the arrival of U.S. forces.

²² See David Shambaugh, "A Matter of Time: Taiwan's Eroding Military Advantage," *The Washington Quarterly*, 23:2 (Spring 2000), pp. 119–133 and Department of Defense, *Annual Report on the Military Power of the People's Republic of China*, May 28, 2004, <<http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/d20040528PRC.pdf>>.

²³ Michael O'Hanlon, "Why China Cannot Conquer Taiwan," *International Security*, 25:2 (Fall 2000), pp. 51-86.

²⁴ William S. Cohen, "The Security Situation in the Taiwan Strait," report to Congress pursuant to the FY99 appropriations bill, Department of Defense, Washington D.C., 1999, p. 22.

Chinese analysts stress that China's military buildup is intended to deter Taiwan independence, not to compel reunification. Some argue that a military balance across the Taiwan Strait is destabilizing because it permits Taiwan leaders to move toward Taiwan independence. Taiwan and U.S. analysts tend to view China's military modernization as a destabilizing effort to compel Taiwan to accept unification on China's terms. Some Chinese analysts and officials recognize that emphasis on the military dimension of China's Taiwan policy has significant costs in terms of China's international image and in reinforcing negative attitudes toward China in Taiwan. However they argue that China has no alternative if it wishes to deter Taiwan independence.

A key question is whether China's civilian leaders have the desire—or the ability—to restrain the militarization of China's Taiwan policy. Chinese leaders probably believe that favorable changes in the military balance make reunification on PRC terms more likely, and have therefore funded and supported PLA modernization efforts aimed at Taiwan (and at deterring U.S. military intervention). However, Americans increasingly view China's behavior toward Taiwan as an indicator of whether China is likely to pose a future threat to the United States, raising the potential costs of a PRC military buildup. It is unclear whether Hu Jintao and other Chinese political leaders would have the willingness to intervene decisively into the PLA's domain to limit the ongoing military buildup if the international political and economic costs get too high.

Trends in the United States

More overt American support for Taiwan

Taiwan's democratization has transformed the basis of U.S. support. When Taiwan was ruled by the authoritarian KMT government, U.S. support was based primarily on negative objectives: not wanting to betray a former ally and avoiding a loss of credibility with other U.S. allies. Taiwan's transition to a vibrant, successful democracy created a new positive basis for American support.

Congressional and public support for Taiwan has grown as the issue has become defined in terms of the need to protect democratic Taiwan from military threats posed by Communist China. China's 1995-96 coercive missile diplomacy and continuing military buildup have increased American concerns that Taiwan is at risk.

U.S. support for Taiwan has become increasingly overt since the 1995-96 Taiwan Strait crisis, partly due to the belief that clearer signs of American support will deter China from using force. Taiwan officials have emphasized the importance of symbolic gestures that demonstrate the connection between the United States and Taiwan. U.S. support has taken a variety of forms, including loosening restrictions on unofficial contacts between U.S. and Taiwan government officials, granting transit visas for Taiwan leaders to travel through the United States, Congressional declarations, support for Taiwan's participation in international organizations such as the World Health Organization, willingness to sell Taiwan more advanced defensive weapons, and clear indicators that the United States would intervene if China uses force against Taiwan.

The clearest sign of increasing U.S. support is the growing security cooperation between the United States and Taiwan. President Clinton's deployment of two aircraft carriers in response to China's March 1996 missile tests and President Bush's April 2001 statement that the United States would do "whatever it takes" to help Taiwan defend itself removed ambiguity about the U.S. security commitment to Taiwan. The Bush administration's April 2001 decision to make weapons such as diesel submarines, Kidd-class destroyers, and anti-submarine aircraft available to Taiwan authorized the sale of advanced systems that had previously been denied.²⁵ Coupled with previous arms sales, the result has been an upgrading of the quality of American arms sales to Taiwan that Chinese officials regard as a violation of

²⁵ Steven Mufson and Dana Milbank, "Taiwan To Get Variety Of Arms," *Washington Post*, April 24, 2001, p. 1.

the 1982 Shanghai communiqué.²⁶ In addition to arms sales, U.S.-Taiwan security cooperation also reportedly includes strategic defense dialogues, visits by military officers and senior civilian officials, educational exchanges, observation of exercises, and assessment team visits.²⁷ These activities have taken on greater importance as U.S. officials and military planners have focused on the practical issues involved in a military conflict in the Taiwan Strait.

From China's perspective, the United States is making increasingly public efforts to strengthen its security ties with Taiwan. Chinese officials argue that these actions violate U.S. commitments in the three communiqués and infringe upon Chinese sovereignty. Moreover they see no clear limits to U.S. support, which they believe encourages pro-independence forces to become more assertive. Beijing has tried to use its own security cooperation with Washington on counter-terrorism and managing the North Korean nuclear crisis to encourage the United States to restrict military ties with Taiwan and to check moves toward Taiwan independence. However China's most important response to increasing U.S.-Taiwan security cooperation has been to accelerate its military modernization efforts to raise the costs and risks of U.S. intervention on Taiwan's behalf.

General Trends

Growing economic integration

One of the most interesting trends since China began its economic reform and opening up policy in 1979 is the increasing economic integration between China and Taiwan. This integration has occurred despite Taiwan government policies and administrative obstacles designed to limit economic dependence on China. The Taiwan government's successive *jieji yongren* (no haste, be patient) and *jiji*

²⁶ The United States stated in the 1982 communiqué that "it does not seek to carry out a long-term policy of arms sales to Taiwan, that its arms sales to Taiwan will not exceed, either in qualitative or in quantitative terms, the level of those supplied in recent years since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and China..." See Alan Romberg, *Rein In at the Brink of the Precipice: American Policy Toward Taiwan and U.S.-PRC Relations* (Washington, D.C.: Henry L. Stimson Center, 2003), pp. 118-154.

²⁷ Michael S. Chase, "U.S.-Taiwan Security Cooperation: Enhancing an Unofficial Relationship," in *Dangerous Strait: The U.S.-Taiwan-China Crisis*, ed. Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

kaifang (active opening, effective management) policies to limit investment in China have been routinely evaded or ignored by Taiwan companies. Because direct trade and investment with China was banned until recently, Taiwanese investment has often been routed through third countries (especially Hong Kong), making it difficult to develop accurate assessments of the total. Estimates of cumulative Taiwan investment in China range from \$55 billion to \$100 billion, with the total growing by between \$5 and \$10 billion per year.²⁸ The quality of the investment has also changed over time. Taiwan investment was originally intended to supply the China market with consumer goods and to tap inexpensive Chinese labor in order to produce labor-intensive goods for export to developed countries. However Taiwan companies have begun transferring production of high-technology products such as semiconductors and liquid crystal displays to China, sometimes evading government limits on investment in China by routing the money through Hong Kong or Singapore.²⁹

Cross-strait trade has surged as Taiwan firms integrate factories in China as links in their production networks. The Taiwan government estimates that cross-Strait trade reached \$46.3 billion in 2003, making China Taiwan's largest single trading partner. (The United States is second with \$44.6 billion in total trade; Japan is third with \$42.8 billion.) Exports to China accounted for 24.5 percent of Taiwan's total exports in 2003.³⁰ Taiwan leaders and security analysts are conscious of the potential dangers of excessive economic dependence on China. Despite government policies aimed at balancing national security and economic benefits and maintaining long-term political stability across the Taiwan Strait, economic factors appear to be overriding concerns about economic dependence. The opening of

²⁸ Mike Clendenin, "Bridging the Divide," *Asian Business*, 36:7 (Jul 2000), pp. 42-43; Craig S. Smith, "Signs in China and Taiwan of Making Money, Not War," *New York Times*, May 15, 2001; Karen M. Sutter, *Warm Economic Ties; Cool Political Relations* (Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council of the United States, June 2003), <http://www.acus.org/Publications/occasionalpapers/Asia/Sutter_June_03.pdf>.

²⁹ Allen T. Cheng, "The United States of China: How Business is moving Taipei and Beijing together," *Asiaweek.com*, July 6, 2001, <<http://www.asiaweek.com/asiaweek/magazine/nations/0,8782,165847,00.html>> and Xiangming Chen, "Business over politics," *The China Business Review*, 26:2 (Mar/Apr 1999), pp. 8-14.

the “mini-three links” to allow limited direct trade between China and Taiwan and calls by a Presidential advisory group for an “active opening” of direct trade and investment ties with the PRC suggest that economics may be in command.³¹

A key question is how growing economic ties will affect the broader political relationship and the calculations of key individuals and groups. Most Chinese analysts see Taiwan’s growing economic dependence as giving China leverage and making independence more difficult, allowing China to be more patient in pursuing unification. Accordingly, Beijing has sought to insulate economic ties from the ups and downs in cross-Strait relations. Chinese officials dropped hints prior to the 2000 Taiwan presidential election that Taiwan businessmen who supported Chen Shui-Bian might encounter obstacles to doing business in China, but did not follow through on these threats. China quietly encouraged Taiwan businessmen living and working in China to participate in Taiwan’s March 2004 presidential election on the assumption that their economic interests will lead them to vote against Chen. However the belief in China that growing economic ties would constrain movement toward Taiwan independence may have been challenged by Chen Shui-bian’s unexpected victory in the March 2004 presidential election. Taiwan businesses see trade and investment with China as an essential aspect of remaining competitive in global export markets, and have expressed this view to Taiwan leaders. Taiwan’s asymmetrical dependence on China may eventually create opportunities for coercion. If Chinese leaders calculate that Taiwan’s economy cannot survive without access to China’s markets and labor, they may eventually feel able to use economic threats to try to force Taiwan leaders to accept reunification.

Some Taiwan analysts argue that economic integration with China may create a situation of interdependence that constrains the PRC’s ability to use economic leverage against Taiwan.³² First,

³⁰ “CNA: Mainland China Emerges as Taiwan’s Top Trading Partner,” Taipei Central News Agency, March 7, 2004, FBIS-CPP20040307000042; “Estimation of Total Trade between Taiwan and Mainland China,” <<http://www.chinabiz.org.tw/maz/Eco-Month/136-2003-12/136-06.xls>>, accessed November 3, 2004.

³¹ See Tyler Marshall, “Taiwan Sees New Ties With Mainland,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 27, 2001.

China's economy would also be damaged by cutting off imports and investment from Taiwan. While Taiwan enjoys a considerable trade surplus with China, many of its exports are intermediate goods that are assembled in China and then exported to third countries. If China cuts off imports from Taiwan, it will cause significant damage to its own exports (and throw millions of Chinese workers out of work). Second, Taiwan and Chinese firms are increasingly integrated into global production networks that export around the world. Efforts to pressure Taiwan's economy would affect companies and countries around the world, producing international pressure against the Chinese government.³³ Third, China is also vulnerable to economic pressure as it becomes more dependent on exports to the U.S. market.³⁴ China enjoyed a \$124 billion dollar trade surplus with the United States in 2003. China may be willing to bear high economic costs to prevent Taiwan independence, but the evidence to date suggests that leaders in Beijing will be reluctant to use economic coercion or force against Taiwan unless they see no alternative. Chinese leaders will be reluctant to fight a war with the United States over Taiwan that might derail China's economic modernization. Economic integration may be more useful as a passive tool to discourage Taiwan independence rather than as an active means of coercion. On balance, economic integration increases the costs of conflict and produces strong incentives for moderate behavior. However those incentives may not be sufficient to prevent leaders from taking risky actions if they believe adverse trends will produce unacceptable outcomes.

Domestic politics increasingly driving foreign policy

Another clear trend in all three capitols is for domestic politics to play a greater role in foreign policy. In China, this is reflected in the trends toward increased nationalism and pluralism discussed

³² See Tse-Kang Leng, "A Political Analysis of Taiwan's Economic Dependence on Mainland China," *Issues and Studies*, 34:8 (August 1998), pp. 132-154 and Chen-Yuan Tung, "Cross-Strait Economic Relations: China's Leverage and Taiwan's Vulnerability," *Issues and Studies*, 39:3 (September 2003), pp. 137-175.

³³ See Tung, "Cross-Strait Economic Relations," and Terry Cooke, "Cross-Strait Economic Ties and the Dynamics of Globalization," in *Cross-Strait Economic Ties: Agent of Change, or a Trojan horse* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, February 2004), < <http://wwics.si.edu/topics/pubs/asiarpt118.pdf>>.

above. But this tendency also plays into issues such as civil-military relations and succession politics. According to Hong Kong press reports, retired and active PLA leaders have used the Taiwan issue to press for increases in military budgets and increased military influence in Taiwan policy. In the mid-1990s, Li Peng reportedly used accusations that senior Chinese leaders were soft on Taiwan as a weapon to reduce the influence of Jiang Zemin and Qian Qichen.³⁵ More recently, Jiang Zemin used the argument that experienced leadership is necessary to resolve the Taiwan issue to justify staying on as chairman of the CCP military affairs commission despite retirement from his other posts. The use of Taiwan for a variety of institutional and individual domestic political goals greatly complicates Chinese efforts to develop a more flexible (and potentially more effective) policy. Many PRC analysts are privately critical of their government's policy; one analyst stated in 2000 that "there hasn't been a new idea out of the *Taiban* [Taiwan Affairs Office] in a decade."³⁶

In Taiwan, Chiang Kai-Shek used the Chinese civil war and continuing state of emergency as a means of enforcing mainlander dominance of politics in Taiwan, while the opposition movement used support for independence as a means of challenging the KMT and promoting democratization. Appeals to ethnicity (which often have pro-independence undertones) have played an increasing role in Taiwan politics in recent years. During the 2004 presidential election campaign, Chen Shui Bian charged that Lien Zhan, the KMT candidate, could not be trusted to defend Taiwan's sovereignty against China. Chen's successful efforts to place referenda on two aspects of cross-Strait relations on the ballot on the same day as the presidential election show how domestic political motivations can affect the security environment. Chen used the referenda to mobilize pro-independence voters likely to support him in the

³⁴ Phillip C. Saunders, "Supping with a Long Spoon: Dependence and Interdependence in Sino-American Relations," *China Journal*, 43 (January 2000), pp. 55-81.

³⁵ See John W. Garver, *Face Off: China, the United States, and Taiwan's Democratization* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1997).

³⁶ Author's interview with PRC analyst, 2000.

election, despite the fact that the referenda produced serious strains relations with the United States (and an even more negative impact on relations with China).

In the United States, China policy has been intimately connected with domestic politics since the 1950s debate about who lost China. Although more of a consensus on China policy existed in the 1970s and 1980s, domestic politics still played a significant role. This was expressed in tensions between the executive branch (which was formally committed to a one China policy and often sought to cooperate with China) and the legislative branch (which was more responsive to Taiwan's lobbying efforts and frequently pushed for greater support for Taiwan). Some members of Congress have also found support for Taiwan to be a useful fund-raising tool, despite the potential negative impact on relations with China and cross-Strait stability. The role of domestic politics has become particularly important on issues such as arms sales (which affect U.S. domestic economic interests). It also affects U.S. declaratory policy on Taiwan, which frequently appears to be aimed at domestic constituencies rather than an international audience. This introduces an element of instability into U.S. policy, because short-term political incentives can undermine longer-term interests.

The increasing role for domestic politics in all three capitols makes compromise more difficult and has produced a hardening of policy positions. Leaders primarily concerned about their domestic audiences are less able to craft flexible agreements that can serve the interests of all parties. Two examples illustrate this point. During the Carter administration, the United States was careful to package arms sales to Taiwan in amounts that did not require a formal declaration to Congress. This gave Taiwan the weapons it needed while allowing China to ignore the arms sales. However the Reagan administration publicized these sales to demonstrate its increased support for Taiwan.³⁷ The PRC protests that followed eventually resulted in the 1982 communiqué where the United States agreed to limit arms sales to Taiwan, arguably leaving Taiwan worse off. A more recent example involves leaks to

the press about U.S. defense talks with the Taiwan military. Although the talks had been held seven times since 1997 without publicity, details of the first round of talks under the Bush administration were leaked to the press to demonstrate the administration's actions to increase military ties with Taiwan.³⁸

Implications

This article has analyzed some key long-term trends that are shaping the security environment in the Taiwan Strait. Five implications emerge from a close examination of these trends:

First, **incentives for restraint are eroding**. Although the “one China” framework has served the core interests of China, Taiwan, and the United States reasonably well, it requires all three sides to make pragmatic compromises and to tolerate a degree of ambiguity about Taiwan's status. Democratization and the population's growing sense of a separate Taiwan identity have both enabled and encouraged Taiwan leaders to challenge the “one China” principle and to assert that Taiwan is already an independent sovereign state with no need to declare independence. Taiwan's provocative behavior has interacted with Chinese nationalism to make PRC leaders and key groups such as the military less tolerant of Taiwan's current *de facto* independence, especially if Taiwan appears likely to move toward permanent separation from China. Taiwan's democratization has provided a new basis for U.S. support that has prompted the United States to ease previous restrictions on political interactions and to increase security cooperation with Taiwan. In all three capitols, domestic political concerns are reducing flexibility and sometimes driving policy in dangerous directions. An ambiguous “one China” framework has played a useful role in stabilizing the security environment for the past thirty years, but its utility may be declining as all three sides become less willing to live with the necessary restraints on their behavior.

³⁷ Author's interview with former State Department official David Reuther, Washington D.C., November 1999.

³⁸ Bill Gertz, “Pentagon Confirms Defense Talks Between Taiwan, U.S.” *Washington Times*, July 20, 2001, p. 1.

Second, **trends are interacting in potentially destabilizing ways.** Efforts by Taiwan leaders to move toward “creeping independence” in ways that Beijing regards as unacceptable have prompted China to accelerate its military modernization and to emphasize efforts to deter Taiwan independence. Beijing’s threats reinforce Taiwan’s sense of a separate identity and decrease interest in unification with China. The perceived threat to Taiwan’s democracy has also caused the United States to increase support for Taiwan, including enhanced security cooperation that Beijing views as a violation of U.S. commitments under the three communiqués. Increased confidence that the United States would intervene on Taiwan’s behalf has encouraged Taiwan leaders to reduce defense spending and to believe that they can move toward independence without provoking a Chinese attack. Interactions and feedback mechanisms can amplify the negative impact of key trends on the stability of the cross-Strait security environment.

Third, **the United States is being drawn into the struggle between China and Taiwan.** The United States has tried to avoid taking sides in the dispute over Taiwan’s status while maintaining good relations with both China and Taiwan. Washington has sought to create a stable security environment that would allow Taiwan to negotiate on an equal footing, declaring its willingness to accept any outcome that the two sides agree on peacefully. Both China and Taiwan regularly seek to influence U.S. policy on cross-Strait relations in favorable directions. China has cited its cooperation in the war on terrorism and in managing the North Korea nuclear crisis as reasons for the United States to become more active in opposing Taiwan independence. Taiwan’s leaders have used democratization and the military threat from China to obtain U.S. security assurances and increased political support. As the military balance across the Taiwan Strait shifts in China’s favor, the United States has become more directly involved in protecting Taiwan’s security. China now assumes that the United States would intervene if a conflict broke out. The United States has sought to avoid having to choose between China

and Taiwan, but the increasing U.S. security role in the Taiwan Strait will make it hard to maintain a balanced policy. Despite efforts to stay out of the middle, Washington has been forced to become ever more deeply involved in cross-Strait relations simply to preserve the *status quo*.

Fourth, **there is a mismatch between potentially destabilizing trends and available policy instruments.** Chinese analysts worry that the trend toward a separate Taiwan identity may make peaceful reunification impossible, but admit that China has few tools to influence how Taiwan people think about their identity. They realize that military threats to deter Taiwan independence cannot reverse the trend toward a separate Taiwan identity (and might even be counterproductive). Some trends such as increasing economic integration across the Taiwan Strait have a logic of their own that appears immune to government policy. Taiwan government officials worry about the potential security consequences of increasing economic dependence on China, but have been unable to fashion effective policy responses. Taiwan has had similar difficulty responding to China's military modernization efforts. Some Taiwan analysts see a window of opportunity to attain independence that may be closing as economic and military trends move in Beijing's favor. The United States has also had difficulty mobilizing its diplomatic resources to prevent challenges to the *status quo*, as its unsuccessful efforts to discourage Taiwan from holding a referendum demonstrated.

Perhaps the most dangerous issue is China's perception that Taiwan's leaders are using salami tactics to push toward independence without crossing Beijing's red lines for the use of force. Beijing has condemned each of Taiwan's actions, but has been reluctant to respond forcefully. If Taiwan leaders conclude that high costs make China unable to use force and continue to move toward independence, Beijing may eventually feel the need to take military action to send a clear signal that independence is unacceptable. This would most likely involve a carefully limited use of force, but this might escalate into a full-scale war that would involve the United States. More generally, the mismatch between

perceived adverse trends and available policy instruments could prompt leaders to take risky actions because they lack alternative means to address growing threats.

Fifth, **economic and political trends are moving in opposite directions.** Political and security tensions between China and Taiwan are rising even as trade and investment ties continue to deepen. Economic integration is binding the three economies closely together, as products are increasingly designed in Taiwan, produced in Chinese factories using components and technology imported from Taiwan, and exported to U.S. markets. The complementarity between the economies provides strong incentives for deeper economic integration. In addition to raising the costs of military conflict, trade and investment ties create interest groups that have a strong interest in stability and access to political leaders. Although the high direct and indirect costs of a military conflict should make leaders extremely cautious about using force, the contradiction between robust economic ties and increasing security tensions cannot be maintained indefinitely. At some point, leaders will be forced to make choices between enjoying the benefits of continued economic cooperation and pursuing risky political objectives such as independence or reunification. The decisions they make when forced to choose will reveal whether economic or political incentives are stronger.

Conclusion

What do the trends discussed above tell us about the stability of the security environment in the Taiwan Strait and about the continued viability of U.S. policy? Taiwan's movement toward creeping independence (enabled by democratization and a growing sense of a separate Taiwan identity) is arguably the most destabilizing trend, because it challenges China's bottom line position and the U.S. policy of opposing unilateral efforts by either side to challenge the *status quo*. If this trend continues, which appears probable given President Chen's re-election and plans to pursue constitutional reforms that would allow for a future referendum on Taiwan's status, a crisis in the Taiwan Strait is likely in the

next several years. China's military modernization and efforts to develop a military option for unification have a somewhat longer time horizon, given that many of these efforts will not mature until 2008-2010 or later. However, even if Taiwan responds with stepped up military reforms and acquisitions of advanced weapons, China's booming economy will allow Beijing to outspend Taipei over the long-term. Moreover, Taiwan's deepening economic dependence on China represents a potential strategic weakness that Taiwan's economic policies have been unable to address. These two trends represent long-term challenges with no easy policy solutions. They might prompt Chen to take advantage of a perceived window of opportunity to move toward Taiwan independence before longer-term adverse trends foreclose the opportunity.

While the overall picture is discouraging, some trends and recent developments have the potential to increase stability. Taiwan's democratization and the pluralization of the Chinese foreign policymaking process both allow a broader range of voices and interests to influence foreign policy, which in principle should allow for a more open debate that produces better policies. Deepening economic integration across the Taiwan Strait and between China and the United States gives businesses, workers, and consumers in China, Taiwan, and the United States an increasing stake in finding ways to avoid a conflict that would disrupt economic ties and impose huge costs. For China, conflict over Taiwan has the potential to derail successful economic development and disrupt efforts to achieve China's "peaceful rise." U.S. concerns about terrorism and interest in managing the North Korean nuclear crisis have also helped promote an unexpected improvement in U.S.-China relations. Although these factors provide important incentives for pragmatic and restrained policies, they are countered by rising Chinese and Taiwanese nationalism and by narrower domestic political incentives which often penalize leaders for responsible policy choices. On balance, the destabilizing trends appear more powerful.

The “one China” framework has been a remarkably successful policy that has allowed the United States to enjoy the economic and security benefits of cooperation with China without paying the domestic and international political costs of abandoning Taiwan. The long-term trends discussed above pose new challenges for the stability of the security environment in the Taiwan Strait and call the continued viability of the “one China” framework into question. The United States has sought to avoid taking a definite position on the question of Taiwan’s status and has emphasized procedural interests such as peaceful resolution. Maintaining the “one-China” framework in the face of the trends described above will require the United States to take more assertive and intrusive actions to resist unilateral efforts by China or Taiwan to alter the *status quo*. The United States will have to increase its political and military involvement in cross-Strait relations merely to preserve the existing situation. Even given these efforts, the United States may eventually be forced to choose between China and Taiwan, a decision that would profoundly affect the security environment in the Asia-Pacific in the 21st century.