The Taiwan Issue and U.S.–Asia/Pacific Security Strategy*

Wu Xinbo

Since the inception of the Bush administration, the Taiwan issue has become a litmus test for U.S. policy toward China. Unlike the Clinton administration, which argued that the best way to deal with a rising China was to engage it constructively, bringing it into the international community and turning it into a cooperative partner in regional and global affairs, the Bush administration holds that “it is important to promote China’s internal transition through economic interaction while containing Chinese power and security ambitions.”

Taiwan is viewed as a useful card in this regard. Although the overall tenet of U.S.–China policy under the Bush administration is still evolving, there have been visible and upsetting signs suggesting that Washington may pursue a policy that would lead to the local containment of China on the Taiwan issue.

Rediscovering Taiwan’s Strategic Importance

The rationale for such a policy is twofold. First, the United States views itself as a status quo power and wants to preserve the current security order in the Asia/Pacific region, of which the de facto independence of Taiwan is a part. The Chinese attempt to bring Taiwan back into its embrace, however, constitutes a challenge to the status quo. Therefore, the United States has to show its firmness and resolve to resist the Chinese ambition on the issue. Second, from a realist perspective, the national security establishment in the Bush administration is very much concerned with the change in the balance of power caused by a rising China; however, they believe that as long as Taiwan remains independent of Beijing, much of China’s increased capability and resources will be absorbed and digested by the Taiwan issue, which will effectively prevent Beijing from engaging in competition with the United States for geopolitical influence in the rest of the region.

Such a rationale found its substantive expression in the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) released by the Pentagon last September. By defining the “East Asian littoral” as one area crucial to U.S. interests, the report suggests that Taiwan is part of the U.S. military sphere of influence, not a part of China. The corollary of this logic is that maintaining Taiwan’s status quo serves fundamental U.S. interests in East Asia. Moreover, the report states that “maintaining a stable balance in Asia will be a complex task. The possibility exists that a military competitor with a formidable resource base will emerge in the region.”

Aside from Japan, no East Asian country other than China fits this profile, and the fact that Japan is America’s ally leaves China as the only suspect. Even though some in the Bush administration have changed the Bush presidential campaign rhetoric that described China as America’s “strategic competitor,” the QDR sticks

---

* This is an updated version of Professor Wu’s presentation at the National Committee on American Foreign Policy Roundtable on U.S.–China Relations and the Taiwan Issue held from January 13 to 15, 2002, in New York City.
to the hard-line thinking within the Republican party that China is America’s potential adversary.

If, as outlined in the report, China is America’s chief military competitor and Taiwan should be part of the U.S. “sphere of influence,” what do those conclusions presage for U.S. security policy in the Asia/Pacific region? First, Washington should adjust its military deployment in the region in order to be prepared for large-scale military competition with China such as an increase in aircraft carriers, enhanced contingency stationing for the U.S. Air Force, and the deployment of more surface combatants. Second, the United States will “help Taiwan defend itself” by providing more advanced weapons systems and lifting the level of U.S.–Taiwan defense links. Washington has become less restrained in its arms sale to Taiwan and its defense relations with Taipei and is more inclined to treat Taiwan as a de facto security ally. This position is highlighted by the fact that even after September 11, Washington continued its arms transfers to Taiwan, contrary to the conventional wisdom that the Bush administration might act more cautiously on the Taiwan issue in expectation of Chinese cooperation in the campaign against terrorism. Third, the United States will further strengthen security cooperation with its allies and friends in the region in an attempt to weave a more robust net in dealing with a rising China. A possible move in that direction is the latest discussion of setting up a trilateral security mechanism among the United States, Japan, and Australia.

It is understood that the QDR largely represents the Pentagon’s opinion and does not necessarily mirror the policy of the entire Bush administration. Yet this does not mean the document is unimportant and can be ignored. In fact, the report reflects three prevailing trends in the Bush administration’s attitude and policy.

- First, pro-Taiwan: Bush’s statement that the United States would “do whatever it took to help Taiwan defend herself” in April 2001 and his emphasis on the Taiwan Relations Act in Beijing in February 2002 attested to his intent.
- Second, assisting Taiwan militarily and politically by selling large amounts of advanced weapons systems to Taiwan, developing closer defense links with Taipei, and promoting Taiwan’s “international visibility.”
- Third, a strong concern over a rising China and a desire to forge closer defense and diplomatic ties with some of China’s potential adversaries in Asia.

### Flawed Thinking

Although it has yet to be determined how far along this line the U.S.–East Asian security policy will go, given the impact of the September 11 tragedy, the overall orientation has been set in the QDR. From a Chinese perspective, the above line of thinking is flawed in three dimensions, as listed below.

Although security concerns may never evaporate in the Asia/Pacific region for most regional members, economic concerns are foremost. George Shultz argued in the 1980s that as long as economic growth was sustainable in the Asia/Pacific region, the region as a whole would be all right. This conclusion is still valid today. Affected by the Asian financial crisis of 1997–1998, faced with a decade-long recession in Japan, and confronted with China’s membership in the World Trade Organization and its becoming a “world workplace,” almost all East Asian states are preoccupied with the growth of their economies. From Seoul to Bangkok, all states have been trying to reinvigorate their economies by launching structural reform internally and seeking benefits externally from enhanced regional economic cooperation. Although many worry about the arrival of a stronger China, concern is focused more on the economic dimension than on the military aspect. Washington, however, seems to care more...
about the security side mainly because it wants to preserve U.S. dominance in the region and suspects that the rise of China might challenge that objective. From the U.S. perspective, this is understandable; but from a regional perspective, U.S. concern is out of step with mainstream opinion shared by most regional members.

There has been an obvious shift in the dynamics of the Taiwan issue. Before 1979, Taiwan was an issue that could have triggered military confrontation across the Strait, and the PRC vowed to use force to “liberate Taiwan.” From 1979 to late 2000, Taiwan was an issue subject to political negotiation between Beijing and Taipei, and Beijing proposed the “one-country/two-systems” formula to solve the problem. With Chen Shui-bian’s election, political negotiation across the Taiwan Strait appears less likely. The economic integration of the two sides, however, seems to have added a new and fundamental dynamic to the equation and may in the long term create a constructive framework in which the Taiwan issue will be managed. In other words, it raises the prospect of “muddling through” the current political gridlock of the Taiwan entanglement toward an economically driven, evolutionary, and peaceful solution. Nevertheless, the ongoing U.S. effort to arm Taiwan can serve only to aggravate the situation and derail a solution to the issue. As a result, the Chinese—the leaders and the public alike—feel puzzled, disappointed, and frustrated with U.S. policy. The nature of the questions posed by Chinese students at Tsinghua University regarding U.S.–Taiwan policy when President Bush visited there in February is only one expression of those feelings.

Some may argue that U.S. arms sales to Taiwan are mainly a response to the mainland’s military buildup against the island. That may be partially true. But even though Beijing is prepared for the worst-case scenario—that is, Taiwan’s moving toward a permanent separation from China or a situation in which unification can be brought about only by the use of force—it has not yet given up hope and is striving for a best-case scenario—namely, peaceful unification. Simply put, at a time when China is working for the best and is prepared for the worst, the United States should facilitate a best-case scenario and help avoid a worst-case one. Some Americans suggest that growing U.S. arms sales to Taiwan and expanding military ties with Taipei are intended to send a clear message to Beijing that Washington does not approve of a military solution of the issue. Nonetheless, the question is whether Beijing can be deterred if it believes its core national interests are jeopardized. The past has suggested that under such circumstances, Beijing will not hesitate to do what it deems necessary, even if that means a conflict with the United States. On the other hand, the continued substantive sale of U.S. arms to Taiwan may send a very dangerous signal to Taipei: No matter what it does, the United States will come to the assistance of Taiwan. At a time when the Democratic Progressive party (DPP) is holding administrative power and constitutes the largest party in the Legislative Yuan, U.S. action may serve to embolden the fundamentalists within the DPP.

The third example of flawed thinking is the Americanization of the Taiwan issue. After Nixon’s historic trip to China in 1972, the United States tried to turn the Taiwan issue into a question between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait, not one between China and the United States. Washington, for instance, adopted a “one-China” policy, recognized the PRC as the only legitimate government representing China, and expressed the hope that the issue would be settled peacefully by the Chinese themselves. Such positions not only facilitated the development of Sino–U.S. relations but also contributed to stability in the Taiwan Strait and the growth of Cross-Strait ties. As some of the political elite in Washington attempt to redefine the Taiwan issue as one of China–U.S. geopolitical rivalry, they are turning the issue back into one between Beijing and Washington. This approach is not only challenging the foundation of China–U.S. relations fostered during the past six U.S. administrations but also is complicating the Taiwan issue by casting it into a quite different context.
How to Untie the Knot in U.S.–Taiwan Policy?

The knot in U.S.–Taiwan policy can be attributed to the U.S. vision of regional order in the Asia/Pacific region, the core of which is U.S. dominance/preponderance. To achieve that, according to the QDR, “maintaining favorable military balances in critical geographic areas” is essential. In the era of globalization, however, power has become more diffuse, rendering the concept of the balance of power less relevant, if not outdated. In particular, the balance of military power has lost its relevance because of the decline in the likelihood of military conflict among the major powers, the rise of nontraditional security challenges, and, most important, the vulnerability issuing from growing interdependence. As argued by Joseph Nye, Jr., as the world becomes one of multilevel interdependence, military prowess will be a poor predictor of the outcomes of the games played on the economic and transnational playing boards of current world politics. “The United States is better placed with a more diversified portfolio of power resources than any other country, but the current world order is not an era of American hegemony.” This requires Washington to take a more realistic view of the regional order and adopt a liberal approach to international politics in the Asia/Pacific region.

The alternative to the balance of power is the balance of interests. The concept does not suggest an absolutely equal distribution of interests among states. Instead, it proposes that countries should avoid challenging one another’s “core national interests.” A country’s wisdom in managing major power relations is to know when and where it should stop in the pursuit of its national interests before the approach backfires. In the case of Taiwan, territorial integrity is China’s core national interest, whereas the U.S. concern over the rise of China and the evolving balance of power in the Asia/Pacific region need not be addressed at the expense of China’s core national interest. In other words, Washington should respect China’s aspiration for national unification and should not view the Taiwan issue as the focal point of a U.S.–China geopolitical competition, which is imaginary.

China can and should facilitate the untying of the knot in U.S.–Taiwan policy. One aspect of America’s concern is that Taiwan’s unification with the mainland will greatly enhance China’s strategic position in East Asia and pose a challenge to the interests of the United States and its allies in the region. According to Beijing’s public position on the issue, however, after unification, Taiwan will be allowed to keep its military, and the mainland will not station a single soldier on the other side of the Strait. In that event, Taiwan will be neutralized, for it could no longer be considered in anybody’s military sphere of influences; nor would it be the symbol of major power competition.

Another dimension of U.S. concern is the peaceful resolution of the issue. Although Beijing, as part of its carrot-and-stick strategy, has built up its military pressure on Taiwan, the mainland has not abandoned its long-held policy of “peaceful unification.” From Beijing’s perspective, the military buildup serves mainly as a deterrent that prevents Taiwan from seeking de jure separation from China, not as the means to secure unification. As mentioned earlier, what is more significant is the trend of economic integration across the Taiwan Strait, which is transforming the issue from one of high politics into one of low politics. As long as Beijing relies heavily on this low-politics approach to the Taiwan issue, U.S. concern about a peaceful resolution will be addressed. In this regard, the statement made by Chinese Vice Premier Qian Qichen on January 24, 2002, reflects not only Beijing’s more flexible approach to the Taiwan issue but also its growing confidence that the issue can be resolved peacefully. To encourage Beijing to stick to its peaceful unification policy, however, the United States should reassure Beijing of its long-held one-China policy and exercise maximum self-restraint on its arms sales as well as defense links to Taiwan.

Broadly speaking, China and the United
States should launch an open-minded and constructive strategic dialogue regarding each other’s intentions in the Asia/Pacific region. As President Jiang Zemin told President Bush during their October 2001 meeting in Shanghai, China encourages the United States to play a healthful and constructive role in promoting regional peace and stability. That was a significant statement, given China’s long-held ambiguous attitude toward the U.S. role in the region. Jiang’s expression of goodwill toward the United States was meant to dissipate its suspicion that China, as it becomes stronger, may try to drive the United States out of East Asia. The United States, for its part, should make clear that it wants to be a leading but not dominant power and will not try to deprive other countries of the right to pursue their legitimate national interests as long as the approaches are appropriate. Moreover, Washington should abandon the fatalist view that China is an inevitable rival. As Ambassador James E. Goodby argued,

For too long we have been told that China is a strategic competitor determined to counter U.S. interests in the Asia–Pacific [region] in order to advance its own regional, or even global, ambitions. In light of more pressing threats to U.S. security, this view appears exaggerated and unproductive. It is now clear that we need a China that opposes terrorism and supports stability both in Asia and elsewhere, not a China that sees itself as the target of a U.S. technological and military buildup. This should be possible but only if the Bush administration abandons its presumption of an inevitable conflict with China.8

When President Bush told Chinese students at Tsinghua University on February 22 that “China is on a rising path, and America welcomes the emergence of a strong and peaceful and prosperous China,” it was a good beginning toward building mutual confidence. Yet more substantive things should be said (especially on the Taiwan issue) and done if a “constructive and cooperative” relationship is to be forged.

About the Author

Wu Xi, a member of the NCAF’s Roundtable on U.S.–China Policy and Cross-Strait Relations, is a professor at the Center for American Studies, Fudan University.

Notes

Copyright of American Foreign Policy Interests is the property of Taylor & Francis Ltd and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.