**Analyzing the “Abandoning Taiwan” Argument**

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**Paper Delivered at 2011 American Association for Chinese Studies Annual Meeting,**

**October 14-16, the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, Pa**

**(Rough draft)**

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US policy towards the Taiwan issue is once again being brought to public attention. The last public discourse occurred in the mid 1990s which was about how to support Taiwan’s young democracy so that it would not fall prey to China’s aggressive actions. Only half a decade later, calls to “remov[ing] Taiwan as a major player in the United States’ Asian security strategy” (Gilley, 2010: 60) and to “back[ing] away from [Washington’s] commitment to Taiwan” (Glaser, 2011) have been heard. Such calls originate from the concern that America’s continuing support for Taiwan could spoil important relations between the US and the People’s Republic of China. Because Beijing treats Taiwan, along with Tibet and Xinjian, as one of its “core interests” (Swaine, 2010), Washington’s continuing support for Taiwan has become the single most thorny issue between the two countries. Also pointing to the improved cross-Strait relations since the inauguration of incumbent President Ma Ying-jeou in 2008, it is argued that the status quo “that the United States has protected is no longer the status quo that the Taiwanese want protected.” Thus, “Washington should follow the lead of the Taiwanese people in redefining their future” (Gilley, 2010: 58).

Such calls are based on two assumptions. First, it is assumed that the Ma administration’s rapprochement policies and the improved cross-Strait relations in recent years represent the common desire of Taiwanese citizens for moving into China’s orbit and, implicitly, with cross-Strait unification as an eventual goal. Second, it further assumes that by backing away from its support for Taiwan, Washington can eliminate major differences with Beijing and enhance close cooperation between the two countries on most, if not all, of the concerned issues. Employing the survey data collected in Taiwan and the realist perspective these calls are based on, this study argues that the above assumptions are both empirically erroneous and theoretically invalid. Abandoning Taiwan or reducing support for Taiwan will not secure smoother US-China relations but will place US strategic interests at risks.

**Taipei’s Rapprochement Policies**

Since taking office in May 2008, Taipei’s Nationalist (Kuomintang [KMT]) government under Ma’s leadership has faced a series of domestic and external challenges, including a sagging economy, deteriorating cross-Strait ties, strained US-Taiwan relations, and the possibility of a marginalized Taiwan in international economy. Recognizing that cross-Strait relations play a critical role in resolving these issues, the Ma administration has adopted a policy of rapprochement which aims to maintain good relations with China without endangering Taiwan’s autonomy. Thus, instead of promoting the island’s distinct and independent status from China, Ma proclaimed that his administration adopted the 3-no policy of “no unification, no independence and no use of military force,” packaged under the notion of “one China with respective interpretations” (*yi-zhong ge-biao*). [[1]](#footnote-1) Dubbed as the “1992 Consensus,” the “one China with respective interpretations” presumably is a tacit understanding reached by Beijing and Taipei in November of 1992 that the notion of “one China” should serve as the basis for cross-Strait interactions, even though they had different conceptualizations of “one China.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Because the issue of Taiwan’s sovereignty has long been considered a “contact killer” between Beijing and Taipei, this “agree-to-disagree” approach allows both sides to shelve “high politics” issues and focus on “low politics” matters. Ma also reversed the confrontational diplomacy of the previous administration and called for a ‘diplomatic truce’ (*wai-jiao xiu-bing*) between Beijing and Taipei. Instead of bidding for full membership in the UN which is doomed to failure due to Beijing’s objection, the Ma administration only asked for ‘meaningful participation’ in the international community (Wang, Lee and Yu, 2010). In essence, these policies aim to maintain cross-Strait status quo.

Ma’s initiatives are in sharp contrast to those of the former government led by President Chen Shui-bian of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Chen has a strong pro-independence credential and the DPP is the only major political party on the island that has a plank of pursuing Taiwan’s de jure independence. During his 8-year presidency, Chen pursued a series of pro-independence initiatives, including holding referenda during the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections and pursuing Taiwan’s membership in the UN and World Health Organization (WHO) as a state (Wang, 2006). Because Beijing leaders saw these policies as pretexts for declaring the island’s de jure independence, cross-Strait tension flared up from time to time. The international community, particularly the US, increasingly viewed Taiwan under Chen’s leadership as “troublemaker” (Rigger, 2009; Sutter, 2009; Wang, Lee and Yu, 2010). One of Washington’s main tasks in managing cross-Strait relations during Chen’s presidency was thus to avoid serious conflicts, including military ones, from occurring.

Ma’s conciliatory and pragmatic policies are thus welcomed by Beijing and praised by Washington. Raymond Burghardt, the Chairman of the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT), commented on the improving atmosphere in cross-Strait relations saying that “the Obama administration, like the Bush administration before it, has a very positive view of the progress that has been made since last May in restoring dialogue across the Taiwan Strait and in the many steps toward improved cross-Strait relations that have been taken” (AIT, 2009). Burghardt’s statement is a strong endorsement of Ma’s rapprochement policies towards China. The improved relations have since move both sides to reach more than a dozen agreements on regularly-scheduled direct flights, direct cargo shipping, rules on tourism, Chinese investment in Taiwan, financial cooperation, the food safety of Chinese products and the protection of intellectual property right.[[3]](#footnote-3) A landmark trade deal, the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA), was reached in June 2010, which institutionalizes cross-Strait economic exchanges and reduces tariff and investment barriers of Taiwanese investment in China. Cross-Strait tension has dropped to the lowest level in 15 years.

**Into China’s Orbit?**

Because of these positive developments, it appears that Taiwan and China have developed increasingly closer economic as well as political relations. Some observers assume that Ma’s rapprochement policy reflects Taiwanese citizens’ common desire for changing the status quo and moving toward a unifying “greater China.” Such an assumption is erroneous because it is inconsistent with the evidence reflected in survey data collected in Taiwan. Indeed, the island citizens hold a positive view on the cross-Strait economic exchanges. As Table 1 shows, more than 50% of the respondents believe that the expanded economic exchanges since Ma’s inauguration have brought favorable impacts on Taiwan’s economy. That said, about two-thirds of the island citizens view Taiwan and China as two separate states, as data in Table 2 demonstrate. Such a view clearly crosses partisan lines since the majority of respondents with different partisan affiliations see Taiwan as an independent and separate state from China. Table 3 further shows that during the past two decades very few Taiwanese residents want an immediate political change in either direction of unification or independence. Although they may differ in their views on the island’s long-term relationship with China as some prefer an eventual unification in the future and some favor independence, about 90% of the island citizens prefer maintaining the status quo. Thus, while Taiwanese citizens favor the improved cross-Strait economic relations, they have no inclination to change the political status quo in either direction. Ma’s three-no policy of “no independence, no unification, and no use of military force” packaged under the “1992 Consensus” can best meet Taiwanese citizens’ demand for a peaceful and prosperous status quo. As Table 4 shows, Ma’s call for “one China with respective interpretations” aiming to maintain the cross-Strait status quo has received support from the majority of the island citizens. Interestingly, as data in Table 5 show, 70% of the respondents feel that Beijing has not or barely complied with the “1992 Consensus” in dealing with cross-Strait relations.

Based on the above discussion, we can hardly reach the conclusion that Taiwanese citizens have changed their policy positions on cross-Strait relations. Just like many other countries in the world, Taiwan is taking advantage of China’s booming economy and has become one of its trading partners. Notwithstanding this close economic relationship, the Ma administration’s policies are to keep a political distance between Taiwan and China, which reflects the common desires of the island country’s citizens.

**Avoiding Conflict?**

Another major assumption underlying the call for abandoning Taiwan is that by doing so Washington can resolve most, if not all, differences with Beijing. Speaking from the realist perspective, scholars who made this call believe that a rising China imposes serious challenges to American national interests. Because the relative power of the US is ebbing and Washington requires Beijing’s cooperation on a variety of issues, they optimistically believe that reducing American support for Taiwan could resolve the most contentious issue in US-China relations and leads to a more cooperative China.

While speaking from the realist perspective, those who made such a call assumes that the Taiwan issue is the *only* irritant in US-China relations. They ignore the realist argument that differences between a hegemon and a challenger arise from the changing power structure in the international system. Because the existing international order is set by the power and the wealth of the hegemon according to the hegemon’s interests, challengers are likely to seek to rewrite the rules of the game as the balance of power shifts (Gilpin, 1981). Differences in pursuing what is perceived as their own national interests are bound to happen and conflicts, including military ones, are likely to occur if these differences are not properly managed (Mearsheimer, 2006)). Making concessions on one issue does not mean that the hegemon and the challenger can live happily ever after because each state acts according to its own interests. For instance, on the issue of North Korea, Beijing only agreed to UN Resolution 1718 after requirements for tough economic sanctions were removed. China’s trade and political relations with North Korea has remained (Bajoria, 2010). Beijing’s position on this issue is not consistent with Washington and is not likely to change in the near future. Meeting China’s demands on Taiwan thus would not necessarily cause Beijing to be more accommodating to other issues that are important to the United States. Note that significant differences between Beijing and Washington exist in a host of issues, including Tibet, trade, currency value, and US forward military deployment.

Furthermore, making concessions on one issue by the hegemon would prove to the challenging state that the former is weak and enhance the latter’s confidence in taking more aggressive behaviors (Tucker and Glaser, 2010). Indeed, China’s remarkable economic performance and rapid development in military capability have led Beijing to take a series of assertive initiatives in recent years, including the call for changing the international monetary system and the assertive territorial claim on South China Sea. Sacrificing Taiwan in any form, including a significant reduction in US support for Taiwan, would only demonstrate to a rising China that Washington could be intimidated into submission.

**Costs of Abandoning Taiwan**

 Backing away from Washington’s commitment to Taiwan would incur enormous costs for Washington. First of all, abandoning Taiwan would mean sacrificing America’s First Island Chain of defense in Asia. Generally referring to the geographical area along the Japanese archipelago, the Ryukyus, and the Philippine archipelago, the First Island Chain has effectively contained the expansion of communism during the Cold War era. Despite the collapse of Soviet Union, this island chain continues to be seen as the first line of defense in Asia by US military planners. The strategic position of Taiwan is an essential link in this line of defense. Should the US push Taiwan away and allow it to fall into China’s orbit by default, Chinese navy would easily venture beyond the First Island Chain and threaten Hawaii or US mainland if it chooses to. Sacrificing Taiwan would also have important implications for US allies in Asia. Japan would find itself to be particularly vulnerable as the sea lanes of supply on which it is so much dependent pass through the east side of Taiwan. Should Beijing use Taiwan as a military outpost, the above sea lanes would be threatened and territorial dispute over Diaoyutai (or Senkaku) would be difficult for Tokyo to defend. Backing away from Washington’s commitment to the island would also mean freeing China’s resources from capturing Taiwan. As China’s military planners need to concentrate less on preventing what is perceived as an American interference in China’s internal affairs, they will be free to focus more on projecting power into South China Sea and the adjacent Indian Ocean, and directly affect America’s Australian allies.

 Probably the most important cost for Washington of abandoning Taiwan is the message sent to America’s allies and surrounding countries in the region. If the US could abandon a de facto ally and a long-term friend in exchange for China’s short-term cooperation, it only shows that the US is increasingly unreliable. Such a perception could undermine the security alliance between the US with Japan and South Korea. They might assess that if Washington could sacrifice its long-term commitment to a democracy in exchange for short-term policy gains, they would be more secure by either meeting their own security needs or aligning with China. Sacrificing Taiwan could also add uncertainty and instability to the territorial dispute in South China Sea. When Secretary Hillary Clinton declared that “the United States is back” (Clinton, 2009), the involved countries welcomed America’s presence in the region. The policy of sacrificing Taiwan could be interpreted as a weakening and a retreating United States in the region. Recognizing they will not be able to hedge against a powerful China, they may bow to Beijing’s pressure and hurt Washington’s interests in the region (Tucker and Glaser, 2010).

Finally, weakening the support for Taiwan could have negative effects on the improved cross-Strait relations. As indicated, President Ma’s conciliatory policies are welcomed by Beijing leaders and praised by Washington. His endorsement of “one China with respective interpretations” essentially excludes the pursuit of Taiwan’s de jure independence during his administration. The 3-no policy of “no unification, no independence and no use of force” aims to preserve cross-Strait status quo which is consistent with Washington’s policy. As tension between Beijing and Taipei subsides, Taiwan is no longer the “troublemaker” to the United States and the Obama administration is free to focus on other urgent issues. Notwithstanding the improved cross-Strait relations and the benefits that Taiwan received from the “early harvest” tariff cuts in the ECFA, Ma’s rapprochement policy has encountered severe criticism from his opponents. Leaders of the opposition DPP argue that the policy will lead to Taiwan’s increasing economic dependence on China and will eventually lead to political unification. They also worry that Taiwan’s improved relationship would lead to the suspicion of American leaders that Washington would be excluded from Beijing-Taipei interactions. Given that the US is Taiwan’s most important security grantors, they characterize Ma’s reconciliation approach as a policy of “leaning toward China and selling out Taiwan” (*qingzhong maitai*). Thus, weakening American support for Taiwan would validate the criticisms and send an unwanted message to Taipei that Washington is not pleased with the improved cross-Strait relations, even though it is not the case judging from comments of US government officials. The net consequences of reducing US backing for Taiwan would be weakening domestic support for Ma’s rapprochement policy and a possible return to the previous confrontational policy leading to heightened cross-Strait tension.

**Conclusions**

The US policy towards Taiwan, embodied in the three Communiqués, the Taiwan Relations Act and the Six Assurances, is regarded as one of the most successful policies in US history. Through a web of incentives and disincentives, known as credible threat and convincing assurance, Washington’s policy of deterrence has maintained the peace and stability between China and Taiwan for the past three decades (Wang, 2010). With a rising China and improved cross-Strait relations since Ma’s inauguration in May of 2008, some have argued that Washington’s policy towards Taiwan needs to be changed. The above analysis has shown that such a call is based on erroneous assumptions that Taiwanese citizens prefer the unification with China and Washington can secure Beijing’s cooperation on a host of issues if it backs away from its security commitment to Taiwan. Ma’s rapprochement approach reflects Taiwanese citizens’ common desire for improved cross-Strait relations but keeping political distance between Taiwan and China. A policy of sacrificing Taiwan, including a reduction of support for the island country, will not eliminate future conflicts between the US and China. It would, however, have negative effects on America’s defense in Asia, on US security alliances with Japan and South Korea, on regional stability and on Washington’s credibility in the world community. Maintaining the support for Taiwan thus will serve Washington’s interests by demonstrating that the US will continue to engage in Asia and as a credible superpower, despite talk of a declining US power in the international community.

The above analysis also has important policy implications for Beijing leaders. Throughout the past decades, China’s approach to Taiwan involved both soft-pronged and hard-pronged tactics. The former includes using its economic clout to integrate Taiwan and the latter consists of coercing the island militarily and isolating Taiwan diplomatically. Despite the improved cross-Strait relations during Ma’s presidency, Beijing continues these tactics. Thus, while Taipei was finally invited to attend the World Health Assembly (WHA) in 2009 after 17-years failed attempts, presumably with Beijing’s tacit consent, Taiwan’s participation in international organizations continues to be restricted. When the Obama administration decided to upgrade Taiwan’s 145 F-16 A/B aging fleet of fighter jets, Chinese leaders angrily denounced the action and warned Washington that the sales would damage US-China relations. Beijing’s tactics play right into the hands of the opposition DPP which is far more suspicious of China. Leaders of the DPP have long criticized Ma’s engagement approach towards China and warned that his policies will endanger Taiwan’s security and sovereignty. Indeed, Taipei would be too insecure to negotiate with Beijing in the absence of US support. Should Beijing succeed in pressuring Washington into reducing its support for Taipei, it would only prove that Ma’s efforts of strengthening ties with the US has not worked and his engagement policies towards China are at the expense of the island’s security and sovereignty. The net effect will be a vulnerable Ma and his rapprochement approach. The much improved cross-Strait relationship is likely be replaced by tension and instability. Ironically, it is to Chinese leaders’ own interests to see a continuing US support for Taiwan if they are truly committed to a peaceful resolution of cross-Strait conflict.

**Table 1**

**Taiwan Citizens’ View on Cross-Strait Economic Exchange**

**(N=1130)**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Very Unfavorable | 14.9(168) |
| Unfavorable | 15.4(174) |
| Favorable | 38.0(429) |
| Very FavorableNo response /Don’t Know | 14.1(159)17.6(199) |
|  |  |

Note: Column percentages are on the top and the corresponding frequencies are in parentheses below.

Data Source: *The Study on Taiwanese Citizens’ Positions on Independence and Unification* (the Election Study Center of National Chengchi University in Taiwan, 2011)

**Table 2**

**Taiwan as an Independent State**

**(N=1037)**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Pan-Blue | Non-Partisan | Pan-Green | Total |
| Taiwan and China Mainland are two independent states | 58.4(212) | 78.0(298) | 88.7(259) | 74.2(769) |
| Taiwan and China Mainland are both part of China | 41.6(151) | 22.0(84) | 11.3(33) | 25.8(268) |

Note: Column percentages are on the top and the corresponding frequencies are in parentheses below.

Data Source: *The Study on Taiwanese Citizens’ Positions on Independence and Unification* (the Election Study Center of National Chengchi University in Taiwan, 2011)

|  |
| --- |
| **Table 3****Taiwan Citizens’ Policy Preferences on Cross-Strait Relations: 1994-2011** |
| Year | (1)Unificationas Soon as Possible | (2)Status Quo Now, then Unification | (3)Status Quo Now, Future Action Undetermined | (4)Status Quo Indefinitely | (5)Status Quo Now, then Independence | (6)Independence as Soon as Possible | Total Cases |
| 1994 | 5.8 | 27.0 | 39.0 | 15.6 | 8.9 | 3.7 | 1113 |
| 1995 | 4.3 | 27.2 | 39.4 | 12.6 | 12.3 | 4.1 | 1448 |
| 1996 | 3.6 | 22.1 | 39.8 | 13.4 | 16.6 | 4.5 | 1167 |
| 1999 | 4.1 | 23.4 | 35.8 | 14.5 | 16.5 | 5.5 | 1088 |
| 2000 | 3.8 | 24.2 | 43.2 | 12.2 | 13.5 | 3.0 | 1019 |
| 2002 | 3.8 | 23.4 | 42.5 | 12.2 | 12.7 | 5.3 | 1823 |
| 2004P | 2.9 | 14.7 | 38.7 | 17.2 | 19.1 | 7.4 | 1677 |
| 2004L | 2.4 | 15.4 | 41.7 | 16.9 | 16.3 | 7.3 | 1147 |
| 2005 | 2.4 | 14.7 | 36.3 | 21.9 | 17.2 | 7.5 | 1089 |
| 2007 | 1.5 | 9.9 | 44.3 | 20 | 14.7 | 9.6 | 934 |
| 2008L | 2.7 | 13.2 | 38.6 | 24.5 | 13.8 | 7.1 | 1192 |
| 2008P | 2.7 | 11.2 | 42.2 | 19.3 | 17.3 | 7.3 | 1784 |
| 2010 | 0.8 | 9.8 | 34.3 | 26.9 | 18.2 | 5.0 | 1224 |
| 2011 | 0.8 | 11.4 | 33.7 | 25.6 | 18.2 | 10.4 | 1086 |
| Note: Row percentages in cellsData Sources: Data of the following survey are provided by the Election Study Center of National Chengchi University in Taiwan:1. *Electoral Behavior and Political Democratization in Taiwan: A Study Based on the Magistrate Election in 1993*2. *Electoral Behavior and Democratization in Taiwan: A Study Based on the Elections for Taiwan Governor, Taipei Mayor , and Kaohsiung Mayor in 1994: An Interdisciplinary Study of Voting Behavior in the Presidential Election*3. *Constituency Environment and Electoral Behavior: An Interdisciplinary Study on the Legislative Elections of 1998*4. *An Interdisciplinary study of Voting Behavior in the Presidential Election of 2000*5. *Taiwan’s Election and Democratization Study, 2001 (TEDS 2001)* 6. *Taiwan’s Election and Democratization Study, 2003 (TEDS 2003)*7*. The 2005 Taiwan National Security Survey* (the Program in Asian Security Studies at Duke University)8*. The 2007 Political Tolerance Survey* (the Election Study Center of National Chengchi University in Taiwan)9. *Taiwan’s Election and Democratization Study, 2002-2004(III): The Presidential Election, 2004 (TEDS 2004P)*10*. Taiwan’s Election and Democratization Study, 2002-2004(III): The Legislative Election, 2004 (TEDS 2004L)*11. *Taiwan’s Election and Democratization Study, 2005-2008(III): The Legislative Election, 2008 (TEDS 2008L)*12*. Taiwan’s Election and Democratization Study, 2008: Presidential Election (TEDS2008P)*13. *The Study on Taiwanese Citizens’ Political Support* (the Election Study Center of National Chengchi University in Taiwan, 2010)14. *The Study on Taiwanese Citizens’ Positions on Independence and Unification* (the Election Study Center of National Chengchi University in Taiwan, 2011) |

**Table 4**

**Taiwan Citizens’ Positions on**

**“One China with Respective Interpretations”**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | 2010(N=1096) | 2011(N=1130) |
| Extremely Unacceptable | 12.9(142) | 14.6(165) |
| Unacceptable | 19.3(212) | 19.5(221) |
| Acceptable  | 39.1(428) | 40.7(460) |
| Extremely Acceptable | 13.9(152) | 11.8(133) |
| No response /Don’t Know | 14.8(162) | 13.5(152) |

Note: Column percentages are on the top and the corresponding frequencies are in parentheses below.

Data Sources: *Taiwan Citizens’ Views on Mainland Policy and Cross-Strait Relations* (Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, 2008) and *The Study on Taiwanese Citizens’ Positions on Independence and Unification* (the Election Study Center of National Chengchi University in Taiwan, 2011)

**Table 5**

**Taiwan Citizens’ View on Beijing’s Practices of**

**“One China with Respective Interpretations”**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ComplyBarelyNot at All | 32.7 (297)43.3(392)24.0(217) |
|  |  |

Note: Column percentages are on the top and the corresponding frequencies are in parentheses below.

Data Source: *The Study on Taiwanese Citizens’ Positions on Independence and Unification* (the Election Study Center of National Chengchi University in Taiwan, 2011)

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1. For Ma’s policy see, Ma (2008; 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a discussion of the “1992 Consensus” from the KMT perspective, see Su and Cheng (2002) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For the various agreements reached by SEF and ARATS, see the website of the Mainland Affairs Council <*http://www.mac.gov.tw/ct.asp?xItem=67145&CtNode=5710&mp=1* >. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)