

The Future of the Taiwan Relations Act and U.S.-Taiwan Relations

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A Unique Relationship

The Taiwan Relations Act has served the U.S. and Taiwan well, establishing a unique and special relationship. Over the past 30 years, Taiwan has thrived, thanks to the efforts of the people of Taiwan, and also to the TRA and the environment that it fashioned. The TRA continues to serve its intended purpose, its language is fixed and it retains its importance as the foundation of the U.S.-Taiwan relationship for the past 30 years.

The TRA eloquently states U.S. objectives: “To help maintain peace, security, and stability in the Western Pacific....” This simple and pragmatic desire has not changed, and the ambiguity encapsulated in the TRA benefits Taiwan. Changing it, in my opinion, would not improve Taiwan’s condition, nor would it necessarily further the unique U.S.-Taiwan relationship. Changing it, could potentially embolden China and increase anxiety in Taiwan.

The fundamental issue facing Taiwan is beyond the TRA – it is the rise of China. China’s rise is inevitable and it is fundamentally changing the political, economic and security calculus in the region.

China’s Rise

The U.S. remains the dominant force in the region, but its relative influence is lessening. China’s growing economy and modernizing military are shifting perceptions and balances. China is increasingly important to both the U.S. and Taiwan, which makes understanding it, not containing or confronting it the most important priority we now face.

During the 1996 missile crisis, President Clinton could send aircraft carriers to the Straits in a show of strength, but will this option be available to future presidents? Can we be assured that the U.S. will be able put carriers in Taiwan's waters with impunity in the future? The U.S. government will have to take China's rise into account and ensure that new options emerge to replace old options that become less feasible.

China's Military, Taiwan's Security and U.S. Interests

The People's Republic of China is not going anywhere, so we can not ignore it, we must understand it and capitalize on opportunities to shape its rise. Understanding Chinese intent has proven to be a challenge, leading us to focus on growing capabilities instead. Transparency in China is poor, particularly with China's military, so we do not adequately understand how they make many decisions. Efforts to engage the Chinese military in substantive dialogue or cooperation have lagged behind our engagement with civilian authorities. The U.S. and Chinese sides continue to talk past one another and potentially miss opportunities as we wait for "the atmosphere" to improve. This remains a key underlying problem for the U.S. - China military to military dialogue at the moment. China wants to talk about principles; the U.S. wants to talk about practicalities. The U.S. preference is "trust through cooperation," while the Chinese side prefers, "trust, then cooperation." I just visited the Taiwan military's Political Warfare College and engaged in a dialogue with officers, students and professors. The openness and quality of discussion stands in marked contrast to engagement with most counterparts in China. Of course, China and the PLA have come a long way in a short time in terms of openness and transparency, and continued progress should be encouraged. However, it is clear that we are still at early stages in our effort to engage and understand China's military.

This argues for a concerted effort to increase mil-mil exchanges between the U.S. and PLA to increase understanding and appreciation of their intentions as well as their capabilities. As China's military continues to modernize, exchanges will help us put developments in clearer perspective, though we must be cautious not to undermine Taiwan's security by these efforts.

The question remains, can we turn China's military modernization into an opportunity to increase global security? I think we can find common ground through confidence building measures, and encourage China to hold joint exercises, perhaps even finding opportunities in the future to cooperate in humanitarian assistance or disaster relief missions. I believe the U.S. can chart a course that accepts China's rise without undermining Taiwan's security.

The TRA makes that possible. The U.S. commitment to provide arms to Taiwan is the most important provision in the TRA. Maintaining Taiwan's deterrence ability is central to U.S. objectives in maintaining peace in Western Pacific. The cross-Strait military imbalance has grown and the U.S. needs to recognize this reality. Arms sales are important to preserve the current peaceful status quo and should not be seen as an effort to antagonize China.

Taiwan's Importance to U.S. Regional Relationships

Taiwan is an important element of the U.S. presence in the region, and the TRA is a symbolic as well as practical manifestation of our commitment. Therefore, the U.S. from time to time should reaffirm the TRA. This sends a positive message to Japan, South Korea and ASEAN countries. As Secretary of State Clinton conveyed on her recent visit to Asia, it is not just the U.S. presence, but our commitment and the perception of that commitment that is significant to the region. Reiterating our commitment to Taiwan and our friends and allies in Asia should be a priority for U.S. diplomacy.

Given the current economic crisis, reiteration of U.S. commitment is reassuring and does not threaten or antagonize China. Declining trade reduces economic leverage between China and the U.S. and Taiwan. If there is something to be grateful about the global economic situation, it is perhaps that it is not fostering a security crisis in the region. Joint efforts to address the economic crisis and other pressing issues such as climate change and the environment, likewise present an opportunity, both for the U.S. and Taiwan to constructively engage China. The financial crisis has provided China with an opportunity to assert itself. It sees itself as a "big country" and undoubtedly it will continue to seek to protect its perceived interests internationally in a more forceful way. As its military increases its capability and its economy continues to grow relative to others, China will be hard to intimidate. Importantly, China's economic growth gives it leverage and influence in countries that feared or fought it 30 years ago, making it increasingly important for the U.S. to maintain strong relationships in the region, particularly with Taiwan.

Evolving Cross-Strait Relationship

The TRA serves as a good foundation for Taiwan to approach mainland China and improve the cross-Strait relationship. The U.S. should view warming China-Taiwan relations as a positive development that does not harm U.S. interests. President Ma has made significant strides in the right direction and the government

and people of Taiwan should be encouraged to continue their engagement. China's and Taiwan's economies can not be delinked at this point and it is pointless to attempt it. Rather than fear being drawn into China's economic sphere, Taiwan should seek to shape China and benefit from its own competitive advantages.

However, it is important to never lose sight of the most fundamental issue; the only reason Taiwan could remain the way it has been for the last 30 years is the TRA and U.S. commitments to Taiwan. If Taiwan tries to improve cross-Strait relations at the expense of U.S. interests and the TRA, then it will be at Taiwan's own peril. The U.S. and Taiwan should honor their unique relationship and never allow their respective bilateral relationships with China to supersede the TRA or U.S.-Taiwan relationship. Likewise, cross-Strait negotiations should not seek to moderate the U.S.' role. Taiwan can ill-afford to jettison its most important bilateral relationship and face an otherwise bleak strategic situation on its own. There is little debate that the strategic balance is shifting to the Chinese side. The importance and role of the TRA becomes even more critical as this trend continues and cross-Strait relations should not come at the expense of the wisdom behind the TRA.

Taiwan should seek opportunities provided by the current situation to improve governance in China. President Ma called Taiwan a "Beacon of Democracy" – contributing to overall trends towards pluralism in the region, and enhancing Taiwan's influence. Contemporary to improving governance at home, Taiwan has the opportunity to exert its own soft power and promote good governance, transparency, civil society development, environmental protection and improved delivery of social services on the mainland. Taiwan would directly benefit from Chinese improvements in all these sectors.

Updating U.S.-Taiwan Relations

This is an excellent opportunity to look at the future of U.S.-Taiwan relations. The U.S.' importance as Taiwan's guarantor is reduced in the minds of many of Taiwan's people as China's economic importance grows and cross-Strait exchanges increase. This is probably not a healthy development. Taiwan must look beyond the immediate horizon and be mindful that the major powers will continue to set the rules and recognize that the U.S. creates the basic conditions for Taiwan's past and future prosperity. Just as the U.S. should reaffirm its commitment to the TRA and Taiwan, Taiwan should reaffirm its commitment to the U.S. Taiwan has not become a successful democracy with a high standard of living because of Mao, Deng or Hu Jintao. The U.S. greatly appreciates it when China and Taiwan get along, but that does not mean that the U.S.-Taiwan relationship should decline or otherwise suffer. Taiwan should continue to engage

in active public diplomacy programs with the U.S., including dialogues and exchanges at various levels, reaching out to a range of stakeholders.

For its part, there are many opportunities for the U.S. to further Taiwan's and our own interests. Supporting Taiwan's participation in international organizations is an important manifestation of U.S. support for Taiwan and it is squarely in our interest. This is in keeping with the U.S.' three key goals for Taiwan: to deter aggression from the mainland, promote economic growth and open markets, and the maintenance of a liberal, open society and protection of human rights on Taiwan. Is a new congressional act able to help the U.S. achieve these goals? Nothing prevents Congress from expressing their support for them. It is comforting that the U.S. Congress has recently unanimously passed a resolution commemorating the 30th anniversary of the TRA. Is a new TRA necessary? Not if it supersedes the current TRA which has served Taiwan and the U.S.-Taiwan relationship so well for the past 30 years.

Thank you very much.