

**The Taiwan elections: don't expect a US policy change** by Robert Sutter

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The Jan. 16 Taiwan elections mark a major transition in political leadership away from President Ma Ying-jeou's policy of accommodation of and closer integration with China.

Beijing has deep suspicions of President-elect Tsai Ing-wen and her incoming Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) administration. Chinese leaders from Xi Jinping down are demanding adherence to the concept of one China expressed in the so-called "1992 consensus." This consensus was used by Beijing and the outgoing Ma government to meet China's requirement that Taiwan is part of China, as a foundation for cross-strait peace, and the more than 20 economic and other agreements reached between the two sides over the past eight years. If and how Tsai will meet Beijing's demands is unclear, as are the possible consequences of not meeting them.

The Obama administration, like the preceding one under George W. Bush, favored Ma Ying-jeou's policy of accommodation of and closer integration with China as appropriate means to protect US interests in peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. The newly uncertain situation in the Taiwan Strait caused by the election result raises important implications for US policy.

However, even with the recent significant US debate over China and a hardening of Obama administration policy toward Beijing, US government policy toward Taiwan is unlikely to change for the remainder of Obama's term. After that, possible change is contingent on which US presidential candidate is elected and the salience of the Taiwan issue among an array of more urgent policy choices for the new US president.

**Taiwan precluded in Obama's tougher China policy**

The Obama administration entered office seeking to continue the generally moderate approach of the latter George W. Bush administration in dealing with China. Although US-China relations swung erratically after the Tiananmen crisis of 1989 and the end of strategic cooperation against the Soviet Union, by the first decade of the 21st century, the US and Chinese governments established pragmatic understandings that stressed positive engagement and played down differences.

Both benefited from this positive engagement; close interdependence meant that pressuring the other would hurt both parties. The US and Chinese leaders were preoccupied with other issues and sought to avoid serious problems with each other. Unfortunately, incoming Chinese leader Xi Jinping

disrupted those pragmatic understandings in various ways. These included: coercively advancing Chinese control of claimed maritime territories at the expense of neighbors backed by the US; ignoring US complaints regarding cyber espionage for economic benefit and state intervention in economic matters undermining US companies; repressing human rights in ways grossly offensive to US values; and accelerating China's military buildup targeting US forces in the Asia-Pacific region.

The result has been [the most serious US-China policy debate](#) since the end of the Cold War. For many years, President Obama rarely criticized China, but Xi's practices prompted a remarkable hardening in US government policy. The president's wide-ranging and often sharp criticism notably did not include Taiwan. Obama's signature rebalance policy in the Asia-Pacific region was repeatedly and sometimes harshly criticized by China. The Obama administration nonetheless went ahead with a wide range of initiatives with Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam and other countries, but initial administration statements about the policy failed to even mention Taiwan. The administration later began stating routinely that Taiwan was included in the rebalance policy, though it avoided discussing any details of what the US and Taiwan were doing, presumably to avoid offending the PRC.

Thus, the hardening of the Obama government's stance on various aspects of China policy has not been accompanied by any change or hardening in its policy toward China over Taiwan. US officials highlight progress areas in its relations with Taiwan less likely to prompt frictions with China. They avoided taking sides against Tsai Ing-wen as they did in using a prominent news leak to voice concerns with her cross strait policy during her first run for the presidency in 2012.

As indicated by State Department [statements](#) on Taiwan made in anticipation of the ending of the Ma administration, the delicate cross-strait situation following the January 2016 election is likely to cause the US government to double down on efforts to encourage both Beijing and Taipei to avoid provocations, seek constructive communications, and reach compromise formulas or understandings that will avoid a break in cross-strait interchange detrimental to peace and stability.

**After Obama**

Americans advocating change in US-Taiwan policy less deferential to China are encouraged by the end of the Ma government and its strong accommodation of Beijing. They use three lines of argument.

One group strongly urges US policy to deal with Taiwan for its own sake and thus argues for more forthright support for Taiwan's entry into the Trans-Pacific Partnership, more frequent US Cabinet-level visits to Taiwan, and the sale of

more advanced US military equipment. This group also wants Taiwan to be at the center of recent strong US complaints about Chinese bullying and intimidation of its neighbors.

A second group strives to counter Chinese expansionism with a clear strategy of working with China's neighbors that would involve maritime control, and interdiction if necessary. Taiwan is at the center of the so-called first island chain and looms large in such plans. This approach would involve gaining Taiwan's cooperation in setting and monitoring sensors and other means of surveillance, preparing to deploy mobile anti-ship missile units to various locations in the first island chain, and ensuring its readiness to use mines and other means to deny access to Chinese ships and submarines.

A third group argues the US should take action that shows greater support for Taiwan as part of a cost imposition strategy to counter Xi Jinping's anti-American practices. This view advocates the actions put forward by the previous two groups should be considered and used as the US endeavors to show Beijing that its challenges to US interests will not be cost free and actually will be counterproductive for Chinese concerns on the all-important Taiwan issue.

How much traction these views will gain, and their potential to change the direction of US-Taiwan policy, will depend on the circumstances. On the one hand, most of the Republican presidential candidates – and arguably Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton as well – promise stronger resolve against foreign challenges such as those posed by Xi Jinping's China. The likelihood of change in US policy to being more supportive of Taiwan and less sensitive to Beijing may increase, contingent on which candidate is elected. On the other hand, the salience of the Taiwan issue and even broader US differences with China may be overshadowed by more urgent policy matters for the incoming US government. Foreign affairs is rarely a decisive issue in US elections and the China debate remains overshadowed by issues such as Islamic extremism and Russia.

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