

Is Taiwan “over”? – I think not by Robert Sutter

Teaching a graduate seminar on contemporary Taiwan, I was asked by a student, “Will you be teaching this course in the future? Isn’t Taiwan over?”

The student’s assessment that a Taiwan separate from China was approaching its end is not surprising. It reflects China’s growing international clout and effectiveness in picking off one after another of Taiwan’s few remaining diplomatic allies, Taiwan’s unusual abilities to alienate both friends and foes with provocative stunts in order to score points in domestic Taiwan politics, and President Bush’s slow but steady shift from ardent defense of Taiwan to collaborating with Beijing to the point of reputed U.S.-China “co-management” of the Taiwan issue. Bending to the realities of China’s power, Taiwan’s growing economic interdependence with the mainland, and evaporating international support for Taiwan, observers in Taiwan and abroad seem sensible in judging that Taiwan has few options other than coming to terms with China.

However, a closer look shows that there is nothing inevitable about Taiwan’s future. Seasoned observers have seen much worse circumstances, notably the dark days for Taiwan following the Carter administration’s decision to join the wave of governments abandoning official ties with Taiwan in a pragmatic pursuit of U.S. interests with China; and the willingness of the Reagan administration, elected on a platform of strong support of Taiwan, to agree to end US arms sales to the isolated and beleaguered Chiang Ching-kuo government in an effort to keep China on the U.S. side in opposition to the expanding Soviet Union. Resilient Taiwan, with important international support, weathered those storms and can do so again.

International Options

Even in international affairs, where China’s influence looms particularly large, Taiwan has numerous options to strengthen and sustain its position separate from China’s control. Success or failure in these options will depend heavily on Taiwan abandoning its self-absorbed diplomacy of recent years. Taiwan leaders have sensationalized Taiwan’s international relations and exploited foreign contacts to score political points in competition with Beijing and with domestic political opponents. In the process, they have alienated many friends abroad. Fortunately, the new Taiwan government promises to deal with China and with international issues more pragmatically and with greater attention to Taiwan’s longer term interests.

Areas for fruitful Taiwan international exchange include the following paths cited in recent academic and public policy accounts:

- Build on the substantial emotional, security, ideological, and cultural bonds that under-gird the recent improvement in Taiwan-Japan relations and Japan’s recent firmness in the face of Chinese pressure over Taiwan.

- Build on Taiwan's ideological attractiveness to popular and media opinion in many of the world's democracies and to some of their governments.
- Develop effective overt and covert funding and implementation mechanisms that allow Taiwan's considerable resources to be focused on a circle of small-nation allies less susceptible to Beijing's attractiveness as a global trading power and UN Security Council member.
- Build on the upswing in foreign direct investment into Taiwan in order to deepen already important economic interest of developed countries in preserving Taiwan's separate status and stability in cross strait relations.
- Strengthen funding and other support for the expansion of Taiwan's ostensibly unofficial international presence with over 100 overseas offices and some salient international organizations (e.g. World Trade Organization, Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, and Asian Development Bank), and memberships in many hundreds of international non-government organizations.

Expand international relations under the hedge

More important for Taiwan's security and international standing is the option for Taiwan to exploit effectively U.S., Asian, and international wariness regarding the rise of China. There is a dualism at play with the rise of China that seems likely to last for many years and has an important implication for Taiwan. On the one hand, it makes Taiwan's future separate from China appear bleak as the U.S. and other powers cooperate more closely with China. On the other hand, it prompts a wide range of contingency plans, known generally as "hedging." This hedge, if used adroitly by Taiwan, provides security for Taiwan and the opportunity to expand important international connections.

In recent years, there has been no notable opposition in the U.S., Asia, or elsewhere to the build up of U.S. forces, large-scale U.S. military exercises, and other significant security moves that are part of the U.S. contingency efforts to deal with possible negative consequences of China's rise. Several Asian nations (e.g., Japan, Australia, Singapore, and India) have been increasingly active in military cooperation with the U.S. in these exercises and in other ways. These efforts have included unprecedented and apparently growing U.S. security cooperation with Taiwan, which has not been criticized by most Asian governments or other concerned foreign powers.

Part of the reason for this is that the U.S. has engaged China and managed relations with China in ways that encourage Chinese leaders to see their interests best served by emphasizing the positive in relations with the United States. This was not always the case. Until 2001, China strongly criticized the very active and multifaceted U.S. strategic presence in the Asia-Pacific and directed public and private Chinese pressure on Asian governments to eschew close strategic cooperation with the United States. However, China found that U.S. firmness and Asian disapproval made such criticism and pressure counterproductive for Chinese interests; it decided to shift to its more moderate approach, limiting most public criticism to U.S. arms sales to Taiwan.

In these circumstances, a new Taiwan administration in May 2008 that plays down Taiwan's recent record of highly publicized provocations with China appears to have the option at the same time to develop smoothly closer and cooperative security and other relations with the U.S. administration and Congress. Recent reports and statements by pro-Taiwan advocates in the Congress, media, and elsewhere strongly demonstrate U.S. receptivity to a Taiwan administration that can build consensus at home behind appropriate Taiwan contributions and cooperative work with the U.S. in securing a stable environment in the Taiwan area. If done quietly and preferably in tandem with planned Taiwan efforts to improve relations with the mainland, this upswing in U.S.-Taiwan cooperation likely will not elicit negative reaction in the Asian region. Governments there appear likely to continue their generally supportive or neutral policies and postures regarding the multifaceted hedging efforts by the U.S. in the Asia-Pacific, including growing security cooperation with Taiwan.

- The new Taiwan administration's pursuit of a less acrimonious relationship with China, which seems likely, probably will reinforce China's rationale to avoid confrontation, even as Taiwan pursues quiet and steady closer integration with U.S. defense preparations in the Asia-Pacific. One possible test of this dynamic will occur if the Bush administration allows the proposed sale of advanced *F-16* fighters to Taiwan.
- It is unclear whether China will react in ways that are so strong that they will change the prevailing positive stasis in U.S.-China relations. The timing of the possible U.S. arms sales announcement relative to the August 2008 Olympics in China may have a bearing on China's reaction.
- It also is unclear whether the new Taiwan administration will be willing to face the budgetary consequences and the consequences for cross-Strait relations of accepting such a sale.
- Asian governments reacting to a major public dispute between the U.S. and China over such a possible arms sale would probably prefer to avoid taking sides, though some may criticize the sale.

Taiwan as a barometer of China's intentions

As Taiwan strengthens its security under the U.S.-led hedge regarding China's rise in Asia, Taiwan also has the option to expand important international relations with Asian and other powers wary of China's rise. Most Asian governments welcome China's rise but they also maneuver, plan contingencies, and position their governments in the face of possible negative consequences for them posed by China's rise. Many leaders of Asian governments and some other world powers remain attentive to possible signs of more aggressive, domineering or disruptive Chinese approaches. Taiwan is a focal point of this interest; it is the "canary in the mineshaft" providing reassurance of continuity in existing Chinese policies and a warning of a more assertive or aggressive Chinese postures.

As a result, prudent Asian and other world leaders probably have and will develop an increasing interest in intelligence exchanges and other security dialogues with Taiwan under appropriate conditions. Such appropriate circumstances presumably include, for

example, that Taiwan avoid politicizing and publicizing these contacts. In the same vein, Taiwan will need to establish and maintain a reputation of providing accurate intelligence that avoids the suspicion of bias or misinformation. Under what appear at present to be good conditions for developing such interchanges, a new Taiwan administration that is discreet and possesses adequate resources from the legislature appears to have a good opportunity to develop a wide range of meaningful official but deniable relations. Partners in these exchanges would include many governments in the Asia-Pacific hedging against possible adverse developments in China's rise, along with powers elsewhere (e.g. European powers and Middle Eastern oil producers), with an interest in monitoring changes in the intentions and actions of the Chinese leadership as China's influence rises in Asian and world affairs.

Robert Sutter (sutterr@georgetown.edu) is professor of Asian Studies, School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, Washington DC. He along with Chin-Hao Huang writes the chapter on China Southeast Asia relations in [Comparative Connections](#), the Pacific Forum's quarterly electronic journal.