

*Does Taiwan Matter to the United States? Policy Debates on Taiwan Abandonment and Beyond**

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Abstract

This article approaches the puzzle of whether and to what degree Taiwan matters to the United States. The deteriorating of cross-strait relations since 2016 has made people more concerned about the sustainability of the status quo. For the Chinese mainland, the danger is the possible collapse of U.S. one-China policy—a key pillar of the U.S.-China diplomatic architecture; for Taiwan, the nightmare is that the businessman-turned-president might sell out the island for economic gains from the mainland. Trump's aversion toward liberal institutionalism and his advocacy of economic nationalism have revived the specter of Taiwan abandonment, which have occurred occasionally in U.S. foreign policy thinking since the late 1940s. To be sure, "abandoning Taiwan" as well as the Cold War mind-set of playing wildly the "Taiwan

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card” are far from the mainstream view in U.S. policy circles today, which favors maintaining the status quo. Still, such heterodox arguments have made salient the fundamental issue of whether Taiwan is a strategic liability or a strategic asset for the United States. Which view prevails matters a great deal for the state of U.S.-China relations and whether that relationship will be more cooperative or confrontational in the years to come.

The deteriorating cross-Strait relations after a power turnover in Taiwan from the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, KMT) to the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in May 2016 have reactivated Washington’s interest in maintaining the volatile status quo. In the wake of the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, the United States began to encourage political dialogue between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait so as to prevent a possible military confrontation around the island, which would force Washington to face a dilemma of either being involved in a war with a rising power or standing by and losing its security credibility in Asia-Pacific. As the two sides moved into the period of peaceful development of cross-Strait relations between 2008 and 2016 thanks to Taipei’s acceptance of the one-China framework, Washington was less concerned over the issue of Taiwan, which was marginalized in U.S. policy agenda. The outcomes of the 2016 elections in Taiwan and the United States respectively have resurfaced the Taiwan issue, however. While the Chinese mainland is concerned that the unpredictable U.S. President Donald Trump might play the Taiwan card wildly in dealing with a rising China, Taiwan is more concerned that the businessman-turned-politician will sell it to Beijing whenever he feels lucrative. Trump’s surprising phone conversation with Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) and his linking of U.S. one-China policy to its bilateral trade relations with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) during the interval from his election to inauguration have not only sent a mixed message to both sides of the Taiwan Strait but also incurred an open letter to President Trump from former chairman of American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) Richard Bush, providing Trump with “some basics” of American one-China policy while reminding him that “Taiwan is not a ‘tradeable good.’”¹ Although Taiwan abandonment is a far cry, together with the outmoded Cold War mind-set of Taiwan card manipulation, the tendency toward antiglobalism and economic nationalism of President Donald