

United States-Taiwan Relations: Tsai's Presidency and Washington's Policy

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Abstract

With Tsai's coming to power several factors portended continuity in the strong U.S.-Taiwan relationship that she inherited. Washington welcomed Tsai's approach of pledging to maintain the status quo in cross-Strait ties. In U.S. policy on cross-Strait issues, the "clarity of strategic ambiguity" endures: Washington assesses which side is to blame for any deterioration in cross-Strait relations, and favors, at least at the margin, the other party. With Tsai, Washington sees Beijing as primarily at fault, in that Washington perceives Tsai as having gone as far as she can (given political constraints), and Beijing as being too demanding. Although Trump administration policies and actions—specific ones concerning Taiwan and broader ones with implications for U.S.-Taiwan relations—and an approach to foreign policy characterized by volatility, a transactional mindset, and institutional fragmentation introduced significant uncertainty, persisting features of U.S. policy toward Taiwan and cross-Strait issues limit the likelihood of change in Washington's approach to relations with Taiwan: the durability of strategic ambiguity, the classic alliance dilemma of abandonment versus entrapment, the persistence of Realist, interest-based analysis that weighs against "abandoning Taiwan" during a long period of more adversarial U.S.-China

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relations, the likely durability of the “values” strain in U.S. foreign policy (despite Trump), the entrenched nature of the Three Communiqués and the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), a substantial congressional role in the stewardship of U.S.-Taiwan relations, and the tendency of U.S. policy on Taiwan and cross-Strait issues to be primarily reactive to choices made in Beijing and Taipei.

Tsai Ing-wen’s (蔡英文) victory in Taiwan’s January 2016 presidential election pointed to generally positive prospects for relations between the United States and Taiwan, and those relations have been good since Tsai took office. The reasons for this include the preexisting state of bilateral relations, Tsai’s rhetoric and policy positions as candidate and as president, long-standing features of U.S. policy on cross-Strait issues, and broad trends in U.S.-China relations.

Nonetheless, the future of the relationship is somewhat uncertain, at least in the relatively near term. Donald Trump’s surprising victory in the U.S. presidential election in November 2016 has been a principal source of this uncertainty, and Trump’s early tenure has not removed doubts about the future of U.S.-Taiwan relations. Also contributing to the uncertainty is the impact on U.S.-Taiwan relations of choices that will be made in Taipei and Beijing during a period likely to be characterized by fraught politics in the United States, Taiwan (Republic of China, ROC), and China (People’s Republic of China, PRC), and amid longer-term shifts in power across the Taiwan Strait and between the world’s two greatest powers.

1. Tsai of Relief

Tsai’s victory and coming to power are consistent with a positive U.S.-Taiwan relationship. Tsai inherited strong—and much-improved—bilateral ties from her predecessor, Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九). Bilateral relations had reached a nadir near the end of the term of Ma’s immediate predecessor, Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁). In the run-up to the 2008 election that brought Ma to office, the U.S. government departed from its usual deference to—and circumspection about—the electoral choices of fellow democracies to condemn the referendum that the outgoing administration had put on the ballot, asking voters to opine on whether Taiwan should seek to enter the United Nations under the name “Taiwan”.¹ This