

On the 20th Anniversary of the Taiwan Relations Act: U.S. Anchor Interests Across the Taiwan Strait

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Introduction

Mr. Chairman, it is always a pleasure to testify before you and this distinguished committee on U.S. Asia policy.

The U.S. has six anchor interests in cross-strait relations, including our interpretation and application of the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), the 20th anniversary of which we observed last Saturday, April 10.

Six U.S. Anchor Interests in Cross-Strait Relations

First, to help preserve an equilibrium of confidence so those on both sides of the Taiwan Strait can determine the pace and scope of their mutual interaction peacefully.

An equilibrium of confidence means both Beijing and Taipei have the defensive articles and services and thereby the minimal sense of security necessary to engage in cross-strait dialogue free of intimidation or coercion; both sides feel the U.S. is taking an even-handed approach toward the other; neither side feels the U.S. is pressuring it into negotiations and that any arrangements concluded are mutually acceptable to both sides.

Some say the U.S. interest in Beijing-Taipei relations is founded on power - that China and the U.S. are natural competitors in Asia and maintenance of the Taiwan Strait status quo is therefore a U.S. strategic interest. Others say the U.S. interest in Beijing-Taipei relations is founded on principle - either in the free democratic expression of the 21 million people in Taiwan or in the eventual unification of "one China."

Defining the U.S. interest in maintaining an equilibrium of confidence recognizes both power and principle. It does not commit the U.S. simply to support a status quo peace and stability, nor necessarily even simply a dynamic status quo.

The U.S. interest is that both sides peacefully determine what is mutually acceptable to them, free from coercive pressure one to the other or from the U.S. The U.S. should thus reject any challenge to the status quo by force, and discourage Taiwan independence, while leaving it to Beijing and Taipei to create the positive conditions necessary to entice peaceful unification. In this regard, the U.S. can welcome expanding Beijing-Taipei meaningful and constructive dialogue in areas such as confidence building measures, international space, and cross-strait contact including deepening cross-strait economic involvement.

Second, to maintain the responsibility of Taipei and Beijing for their continuing dynamic balancing of cooperation and competition, not shifting responsibility for cross-strait peace and communication to Washington for restraint or adjudication.

In this regard, major strains in Sino-U.S. relations, particularly should Taiwan reemerge as an issue in Sino-U.S. and in domestic U.S. politics, could raise U.S. expectations for cross-strait dialogue, perhaps to unreasonable levels. Efforts to establish interim arrangements or especially interim agreements must be careful to avoid unintended, potentially destabilizing consequences of their otherwise clearly well-intentioned efforts.

For example, some current confidence building measures include proposals for Beijing-Taipei arms control talks. Arms control initiatives which establish hot-lines or appropriate military-to-military contacts between Beijing and Taipei could be helpful. But arms control discussions involving Beijing, Taipei, and Washington must be careful to avoid, for example, complicating de facto consultations or prior notification regarding Taiwan arms requests.

The U.S. interest is to minimize the tendency a) by some in Beijing to underestimate U.S. resolve or to assume that Washington could simply "deliver" Taiwan and b) by some in Taipei alternatively to overestimate the nature or scope of U.S. support or to assume that Washington could "sell" Taiwan out. The U.S. gives neither side a veto or a blank check. As demonstrated by the U.S. deployment of two aircraft carrier battle groups on one occasion and by the President's enunciation of three no's on another, the U.S. will indicate a limit to those who might engage in provocative or threatening behavior on either side of the strait.

Though Beijing-Taipei competition will continue, the U.S. interest is to build margins of safety, not simply limits of tension.

Third, to see constructive and authorized direct dialogue between Taipei and Beijing deal directly with differences between them, with multiple levels and channels as the best way for Taipei and Beijing to engage each other directly.

There is an important role for Track 2 dialogue convened and facilitated by institutions such as mine. But there is also a need for consistent, confirmed, authoritative messages between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait if cross-strait trust and confidence are to be built on a solid foundation.

In this regard, both Beijing and Taipei must each be sufficiently confident to enter into constructive and meaningful dialogue. Intentionally undermining the confidence of Beijing or Taipei as a means to promoting cross-strait dialogue is likely to be counter-productive. At the same time, there is a practical linkage between the pace and scope for improved U.S.-PRC relations and U.S.-Taiwan relations and the pace and scope for improved Beijing-Taiwan cross-strait dialogue.

Fourth, to encourage other Asia-Pacific countries publicly to state their interest in regional peace, security, and stability.

All countries in Northeast and Southeast Asia have a stake in maintaining the principle and practice that change in the region occur peacefully, and in publicly expressing that interest.

This does not mean other countries should take sides in what they may see as a Chinese political issue. But there is a danger to all the region if non-peaceful means are employed to resolve questioned borders, territorial lines, or other disputes. While formal collective security agreements have yet to be developed in the Asia-Pacific, emerging regional institutions should perceive a collective interest in peaceful dispute resolution, including issues touching sovereign concerns.

Fifth, in the domestic sphere, it is in the U.S. interest to maintain a working Executive and Congressional working consensus on U.S.-China-Taiwan relations. Particularly in the last two years of a second presidential term, the importance of maintaining a working consensus on U.S.-China-Taiwan relations may be directly proportional to the difficulty of its achievement.

This consensus should be built around four points:

- a. reestablish executive branch leadership and bipartisan congressional support regarding the direction and priorities of U.S.-China-Taiwan relations;
- b. establish a long-term positive framework for U.S.-China-Taiwan relations that encompasses specific concerns within more overarching frameworks;
- c. accommodate the demands of both pragmatism and idealism; and,
- d. acknowledge that both sides of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is one China, as reflected in the three U.S.-PRC joint communiqués and Taiwan Relations Act.

Healthy discussion of the alternative merits of different policy approaches is a hallmark of U.S. democracy, but it is not in the U.S. interest for domestic politics in Washington to become the dispute resolution mechanism for issues better resolved directly by involved parties.

Sixth, to consider in advance the application of the Taiwan Relations Act in circumstances changed by evolving strategic developments.

Important to maintaining an equilibrium of confidence are accurate mutual assessments of intent and capability by Beijing, Taipei, and Washington as part of the process of ongoing adjustment to the mutual understanding of what and how the TRA applies in circumstances changed by ongoing strategic developments. For example, new developments in information warfare and aspects of the revolution in military affairs require ongoing efforts to fulfill U.S. obligations under the TRA. In particular, as air, land, sea, space, and electromagnetic spectrum are brought together in new strategic combinations, situations could well arise in which vital centers of national security gravity for Taiwan could come under attack without visibly triggering the TRA.

Indeed, new combinations of familiar and emerging strategies (such as a PRC air-borne blockade of Taiwan by missile-carrying planes) must be analyzed within the parameters of the three communiqués and TRA so as to forestall any misunderstandings about where and how the TRA might apply within the context of new technologies, strategies, or their applications.

New patterns of cooperative engagement capability; of dealing with classic time, distance, and weight issues in new definitions of theater, front lines, "reach back," etc.; questions regarding effective political presence - these and many other emerging issues will shape the nature of competition and conflict in ways which will require constantly updated discussion of the U.S. interest in cross-strait applications of the TRA so as to minimize misunderstanding or miscalculation.

Mr. Chairman, I have reviewed and defined six U.S. anchor interests in the Taiwan Strait:

- preserve an equilibrium of confidence;
- maintain Taipei and Beijing's responsibility to balance their cooperation and competition;
- see Beijing and Taipei engage each other directly;
- encourage other Asia-Pacific countries publicly to state their interest in peaceful dispute resolution;
- not allow U.S. domestic politics to become the dispute resolution mechanism for Beijing-Taipei issues; and
- consider in advance U.S. obligations under the Taiwan Relations Act to changing strategic and technological circumstances.

It now remains, Mr. Chairman, to thank you and the committee again for convening us to examine this important topic at this timely juncture, and to thank you as well for your kind attention.