

U.S. Anchor Interests across the Taiwan Strait

Testimony of [Dr. Gerrit W. Gong](#)

Freeman Chair and Director Asian Studies Program
Center for Strategic & International Studies

before the Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs Senate Committee on
Foreign Relations

July 21, 1999

Current Opportunities

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of this committee, for the opportunity to testify on a timely issue vital to the U.S. interest in Asia-Pacific peace, stability, and prosperity.

Without minimizing cross-strait tensions, I want today to focus on opportunities in the current situation.

Beijing and Washington are reestablishing positive contact, which reduces possible miscalculation over Taiwan. In their phone conversation, President Clinton and President Jiang reiterated established positions and expressed hope for bilateral progress. Senior State Department and AIT (American Institute in Taiwan) officials are on their way to Beijing and Taipei, respectively.

Initial conversations with President Lee and other senior Taiwan officials are putting his remarks in the context of current de facto and de jure realities. This sets the groundwork for constructive clarification by Mr. Koo Chen-fu, chairman of Taiwan's Straits Exchange Foundation, in preparation for the expected October visit to Taiwan by Mr. Wang Daohan, chairman of the PRC's Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits.

Sino-U.S. market access talks are proceeding. This will hopefully contribute to both Beijing and Taipei joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) this year. There is impetus for upcoming high-level meetings including between Secretary Albright and Chinese Foreign Minister Tang this weekend in Singapore and President Clinton and President Jiang this September in Auckland.

This kind of communication is essential to address fundamental differences in perception and interest between Beijing and Washington. Let me illustrate. Just prior to kickoff of the Women's World Cup final between China and the United States, a televised formation of U.S. F-18 fighter jets overflowed the Rose Bowl. What most Americans would see as an innocent if exuberant symbol of national pride some Beijing viewers could interpret as a potentially threatening symbol of assertive U.S. values or military capability. These perceptual and interest differences underlie divergent U.S. and PRC interpretations of the May 7, 1999, accidental bombing of the PRC embassy in Belgrade; similarly, they underlie often divergent U.S. and PRC approaches to Taiwan.

Where Washington, Beijing, and Taipei do not diverge is in their shared interest in Taiwan Strait peace, prosperity, and stability. This requires preserving the dynamic framework that both sides of the strait consider themselves part of a single China (the definition of which remains under

discussion) and that their dynamic relationship will not be changed by force, by unilateral timetables for unification, or by unilateral declarations of independence.

President Jiang Zemin says he does not want Taiwan to become an Asian Kosovo. In such matters, Chinese memory is too long when it interprets every international action through a historical lens that presumes intent to bully or humiliate China. In such matters, U.S. memory is too short when it fails to perceive how arrogant and shortsighted American triumphalism can appear.

Recent statements by President Lee Teng-hui regarding Taiwan's political status underscore significant changes in both China and Taiwan since the United States first acknowledged in the 1972 Shanghai communique that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China. Taipei says it is clarifying and specifying, that its mainland policy remains intact. Beijing remains suspicious that Taiwan is using semantics to further separation from China.

If the changes over the past three decades are viewed positively both China and Taiwan have a chance to create new cross-strait opportunities, possibly including regarding a single Chinese nation, as both the PRC and Taiwan have suggested. Or these changes could precipitate crisis if they are taken negatively.

Six U.S. Anchor Interests

Beijing and Taipei can more easily pursue the positive when the United States adheres to four "no's" (including no use of force) and six U.S. "yes's."

These six U.S. "yes's" include the following U.S. anchor interests for cross-strait relations:

- preserve an equilibrium of confidence;
- make Taipei and Beijing responsible to maintain their cooperation and competition;
- encourage Beijing and Taipei to engage each other directly;
- prompt other Asia-Pacific countries to state publicly their interest in peaceful dispute resolution;
- prevent U.S. domestic politics from becoming an alternative dispute resolution mechanism for Beijing-Taipei issues; and
- anticipate changing U.S. strategic and technological obligations under the three U.S.-PRC communiques and Taiwan Relations Act to maximize stability and minimize tension.

Each of these American anchor interests is worth elaborating briefly.

1. It is in the U.S. interest to contribute to an equilibrium of confidence so both sides of the Taiwan Strait can determine the pace and scope of their interaction peacefully.

Both Beijing and Taipei need a credible military defense for a minimal sense of security in order to engage in cross-strait dialogue free of intimidation or coercion. Both sides should feel the United States is evenhanded in its approach. Neither side should be pressured into negotiations or arrangements -- including imposed reunification timetables or interim agreements.

Some argue the U.S. interest in Beijing-Taipei relations is based primarily on power. They say China and the United States are natural competitors in Asia, and maintenance of the Taiwan Strait status quo is therefore a U.S. strategic interest. Others argue that United States 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."

The U.S. interest is, in fact, a combination of both power and principle. The United States 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.

2. It is in the U.S. interest that neither Taipei nor Beijing shift its responsibility for cross-strait peace and communication to Washington.

The U.S. interest is to minimize the tendency by (a) some in Beijing to underestimate U.S. resolve or to assume that Washington could simply "deliver" Taiwan and (b) some in Taipei to overestimate the nature or scope of U.S. support or to assume that Washington could "sell out" Taiwan.

The U.S. deployment of two aircraft carrier battle groups on one occasion and President Clinton's enunciation of three no's, including no U.S. support for Taiwan independence on another occasion, demonstrate that the United States will challenge those who 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 just limits of tension.

3. It is in the U.S. interest to encourage an environment for Beijing and Taipei to engage in constructive direct dialogue. Many levels and authorized channels of communication will be necessary for Taipei and Beijing to deal directly with their differences.

This does not mean direct or indirect pressure on either Beijing or Taipei for dialogue, nor unrealistic U.S. expectations or responsibilities placed on cross-strait dialogue. Intentionally undermining the confidence of Beijing or Taipei as a means to promote cross-strait dialogue will be counterproductive. Consistent, confirmed, authoritative messages between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait are required to build cross-strait trust and confidence on a solid foundation.

At appropriate times and ways, broadening cross-strait dialogue could increase Beijing-Taipei understanding. For example, as I have previously testified, some Beijing-Taipei military-to-military dialogue, through established cross-strait channels, could foster basic and more far-reaching confidence-building measures.

In any case, positive developments in relations between Beijing and Washington, Beijing and Taipei, or Taipei and Washington need not be zero-sum. Indeed, some practical linkage remains 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.

4. It is in the U.S. interest for other Asia-Pacific countries to state publicly their interest in regional peace, security, and stability.

All countries in Northeast and Southeast Asia have a stake in maintaining that change in the region occurs peacefully, and they need to say so.

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 nonpeaceful means are employed to resolve questioned borders, territorial lines, or other disputes. While formal Asia-Pacific collective security agreements have yet to be developed, emerging regional institutions should see a collective interest in peaceful dispute resolution, including, if necessary, issues touching sovereign concerns.

5. In the domestic sphere, it is in the U.S. interest to prevent U.S. politics from becoming a dispute resolution mechanism for Beijing-Taipei issues.

As the Cox Commission demonstrated, a bipartisan working consensus can reflect basic U.S. security, political, economic, and human rights interests. In cross-strait matters, such a U.S. bipartisan working consensus can transcend domestic U.S. politics, thereby dealing responsibly with important China-Taiwan developments, especially those determined by factors beyond the United States.

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 to allow Washington domestic politics to become the dispute resolution mechanism for issues better addressed directly by the involved parties.

6. It is in the U.S. interest to review U.S. obligations under the three U.S.-PRC communiques and Taiwan Relations Act so U.S. adjustments to evolving strategic circumstances do not surprise either side. This is required so Washington can meet defense commitments that contribute to, rather than detract from, China-Taiwan understanding and Taiwan Strait stability.

The U.S. security role continues to change with new patterns of cooperative engagement capability; with new definitions of "theaters" and "front lines" in light of new technologies changing calculations of time, distance, and weight; with evolving needs to establish credible U.S. political presence and commitment when U.S. forces may not be immediately visible or deployed in-area. These and other emerging issues are shaping competition and conflict in ways which require periodic security enhancement updates to U.S. commitments within the three Sino-U.S. communiques and Taiwan Relations Act.

Conclusion

I have focused today on opportunities in the current situation that can be seized if we hold firm to anchor U.S. interests in China-Taiwan relations.

The current opportunity is for U.S. leadership to secure the reaffirmation of all parties in their shared interest in cross-strait peace, stability, and prosperity. This will occur within a dynamic framework that (a) both sides of the strait consider themselves part of a single China (the definition of which remains under discussion) and (b) their dynamic relationship will not be changed by force, by unilateral timetables for unification, or by unilateral declarations of independence.

Extreme care is required. Otherwise this opportunity to reaffirm common interests will be squandered in a rush to policy over-clarification. It is not in the U.S. interest or capability to impose a solution between China and Taiwan. Both power and principle demand we maintain a dynamic balance between realities and creative ambiguities across the Taiwan Strait. This is hard for us, because we want clarity, to solve issues once and for all. But this is a Chinese issue that the Chinese must solve themselves. To that end, contributing to a China-Taiwan framework consistent with U.S. interests and values will best serve those interests and values, as well as promote common China-Taiwan interests in peace, security, and stability.