

Opinion – Omens for US-Taiwan Relations in the Biden Administration

Written by Charles K.S. Wu, Yao-Yuan Yeh, Fang-Yu Chen and Austin Wang

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CHARLES K.S. WU, YAO-YUAN YEH, FANG-YU CHEN AND AUSTIN WANG, JAN 27 2021

On the night of the US election day, on the other side of the Pacific, 7,000 miles away from the US, millions gazed at their screens, anxiously waiting for the recent presidential elections' results. Cheers erupted as anchors and pundits, seeing Trump's lead in numerous states, concluded that Trump had won the election. The exuberance turned into exasperation shortly. When many left their jobs in the evening, most media now proclaimed Joe Biden as the forerunner in the election. Welcome to Taipei, the capital city of Taiwan.

Well, different from Trump supporters in the US, the public in Taiwan likes Trump for an entirely different reason. Throughout history, the US has been the most crucial offshore balancer to help Taiwan fend off Chinese aggression. Memories are still vivid among many in Taiwan as the US dispatched two aircraft carriers into the Taiwan Strait in the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1996. In recent years, perhaps for good reasons, Taiwan has flown under the radar – Chinese threats of use of force have all turned out to be cheap talk. As the US busily immersed itself in the Middle East theater for spreading democracy, national building, and extinguishing terrorism, Taiwan and Asia generally have been left out of policymakers' agenda.

In the same era, China has been steadily amassing its power as a strategic competitor to the US. US negligence on the Taiwan issues allows China to bully Taiwan by means of blocking the island's international participation unless major strides toward unification with the mainland have been achieved. For example, the number of Taiwan diplomatic allies nearly halved from 29 in 2000 to 15 now.

Things took a dramatic turn when Trump came into office in 2016. Throughout his presidency, Trump has proven to be the most substantially supportive US president for Taiwan in recent decades, granted that there is a debate on whether Trump's intentions to help Taiwan is transactional. Decisions that the Trump administration made – such as answering a phone call from Taiwan's president, approving ten major arms sales to Taiwan, arranging high-level official visits and bilateral talks, proposing and passing numerous major pro-Taiwan legislation—are unprecedented. Coupled with his strong anti-China policies, Trump has become the most popular American president among the public in Taiwan in decades. That is why Trump's failure to obtain a second term is seemed devastating to many in Taiwan. Citizens feel like the issue of Taiwan will be put on the back burner again.

As Biden is now President, it is opportune to discuss the potential impact of his administration on Taiwan. Judging from his experience in the Obama administration, most believe that prospects for US-Taiwan relations are dim. However, most existing analyses argue otherwise. Some even go so far as to suggest that Biden may even continue Trump-style Taiwan policy in his administration.

In the spirit of contributing to this discussion, let us raise a few points to illustrate that prospective US-Taiwan relations might not be as sanguine. For starters, Taiwan is probably the most predictable. The Tsai administration enjoys high levels of support. The public in Taiwan has also increasingly identified themselves as Taiwanese. However, such a tendency does not translate into support for declaring independence. Combined, we are likely to witness Tsai's second term replicating what it has done in the first term.

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As for the Biden administration, what worries observers is that the administration is simply trying to take up too much. In an essay that he wrote this March, Biden's foreign policy aspirations include ending forever wars, reinvesting in diplomatic corps, lifting women and girls around the world, and combating corruption, to name a few. Compared to Trump's foreign policy, which focuses more on Asia and the Middle East, Biden does not have a geographic preference, hoping to renew "commencement to NATO, maintain the commitment to Israel's security, reinvest in our treaty alliances in Asia, and do more to integrate our friends in Latin America and Africa into the broader network of democracies."

It does not take in-depth training in diplomacy and international politics to realize this plan is unrealistic. Achieving only a few of these objectives requires Herculean effort. Biden's intentions to do all might be real, and if that is the case, we are likely to witness an overstretched United States that would be hamstrung to achieve much in every goal and, worse, incapable of responding to contingency that requires immediate attention. Overcommitment to international affairs will also reduce the approval of the administration among the public. COVID-weary Americans now more than ever wants a government to focus more on what is going on inside their country than abroad.

The United States that is omnipresent in different regions, also reduces its ability to manage and balance China's rise. The China that Biden faces now is different from the one in 2008. Overcommitment to a plethora of issues further handicaps the administration from doing so effectively. Unfortunately, the new administration still has not developed a clear strategy to respond to China. For example, in responding to recent human rights abuses in Hong Kong, the Biden administration seems haphazard, if not muted, in responding to China's continuing challenges to US hegemony and its devastating behavior in destroying human rights and democracy in Hong Kong. Similar to China's human rights abuses of Uyghurs, the US needs to take a leading role in defending global human rights standards.

If indecisiveness in responding to China's behaviors becomes the norm for the new administration, it might embolden the CCP to take risky actions knowing that an overstretched US is unlikely to respond effectively. For China, such a condition is opportune to test the waters about the US commitment to Taiwan in an armed conflict. If increasing Chinese aggression toward Taiwan is unaddressed by the new administration, it might eventually lead China to attempt a surprise attack knowing that the US will not respond as they did in 1996. This will not be the first time for China to test the waters. China's militarization of the South China Sea has also proven its ambition to keep challenging the US and international society's bottom line.

If the waters are tested with the PLA launching its military forces on Taiwan, there will be no return to existing peaceful but contentious trilateral relations between the US, Taiwan, and China. The cross-Strait conflict will result in tremendous casualties on the Taiwan side. China might also suffer greatly, but if the conflict results in a quick victory, the CCP will be able to justify its costs. The US will have the most to lose here. Not only does it lose a strategic ally to balance China, but the inability to defend Taiwan in need will also tarnish the US reputation among its allies.

Losing Taiwan would likely to be the first step in the hegemonic transition from the United States to China, but there is a way to prevent it. Drop overcommitment and continue to focus on China's challenges. Whether the US can properly manage and contain China's rise in the near future will determine not only the fate of Taiwan and the regional security of East Asia but also the new global order and the future of humanity. The maxim *less is more* can also apply to international relations.

About the author:

Charles K.S. Wu is PhD candidate in Political Science at Purdue University. Twitter: @kuanshengtw

Yao-Yuan Yeh is Associate Professor of International Studies and Chair of the Department of International Studies & Modern Languages at the University of St. Thomas, Houston. Twitter: @yeh2sctw

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Austin Wang

Fang-Yu Chen is PhD in Political Science at Michigan State University. Twitter: @FangYu_80168

Austin Wang is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Twitter: @wearytolove