

Whither Cross-Strait Relations if Biden Wins: “Confrontation,” “Procrastination,” or “Negotiation”

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If Mr. Joseph Biden ends up in the White House, Taiwan will be a beneficiary.

His national security and economic teams seem to share the Trump administration’s concerns of a rapidly rising China and the decline of America’s world leadership. But seasoned veterans as they are, they will not ride roughshod without communication, much less alienating allies and withdrawing from one international organization after another.

So the long-term competition between the United States and China under Biden will remain, but there will be some degree of cooperation. The proportion of competition to cooperation may be adjusted to 9:1, 8:2, or 7:3. Both countries may also resume strategic dialogue giving themselves a chance to reset their overall relationship.

Conversely, if President Donald Trump had been re-elected, U.S.-China relations will likely become extremely dangerous for Taiwan. A more confident and assertive Trump would harden his combative ways against China, accelerate economic de-coupling, and further incorporate Taiwan into America’s Indo-Pacific network. As Xi Jinping is to enter his third term in two years’ time, it is highly doubtful that he will remain as passive and tolerant as over the past three years. If and when he decides to counter Trump’s offensive, Taiwan may bear the brunt.

In addition, Taiwan has been focusing too single-mindedly on Trump’s hawkish rhetoric and gestures, while ignoring his soft inner strength. Trump commands so little respect among the U.S. defense, intelligence, and diplomatic elites that even the military commander in the Middle East region dare to contradict him publicly. The pandemic and economic decline have taken a heavy toll on U.S. defense spending. Allies in the Indo-Pacific region seem to be more

pretending than preparing for a common front against China. Only Taiwan under President Tsai Ing-wen had first sided completely with the U.S. without hedging, then favored Trump over Biden, again seemingly without hedging.

These choices incur enormous risk for Taiwan, because there is at present an unprecedented convergence of seven “dangers” in cross-strait relations. First, the political situation in mainland China is stable, while the U.S. is in turmoil. Second, mutual trust across the Taiwan Strait and between the U.S. and China are at all-time low. Third, there is no communication whatsoever across the Strait and little dialogue between the U.S. and China. Fourth, both Trump and Tsai are highly confident and reject voices of moderation at home. Fifth, peoples on both sides of the Taiwan Strait are hostile toward each other – the first time in decades. Sixth, the U.S. Navy seems to be unable to overcome the so-called “tyranny of geography” and the threat of China’s hypersonic missiles to come to Taiwan’s rescue. Finally, whereas the elections in Taiwan and the U.S. are now over, the “election” in Beijing is just about to begin. In the past decades, rarely if ever more than one of the above “dangers” appear on the scene. Today all seven are in plain sight. Can the circumstances of cross-strait relations be more treacherous?

Unfortunately yes. And the Tsai and Trump administrations must have felt acutely. At the end of August, China launched Dongfeng 26 and 21 missiles, known as “carrier killers,” from Qinghai and Zhejiang, respectively, to the South China Sea, in a so-called “simultaneous time on target” fashion, thus demonstrating its ability to strike U.S. aircraft carriers with precision and saturation. In recent months, especially the middle of September, numerous Chinese aircrafts have dashed out into the Taiwan Strait, while declaring “there is no median line in the Strait,” and crossed the median line altogether 49 times.

Furthermore, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) must have put strong pressure on the U.S. - so strong that Washington had in turn to exert enormous pressure on Taipei. This explains why Foreign Minister Joseph Wu had to swallow his pride and utter despondently that “Taiwan is not seeking to re-establish diplomatic relations for now,” “Taiwan will not rely on the U.S. to come to its defense,” and “China may get inappropriate ideas (about Taiwan) after the U.S. election.” President Tsai also displayed some humility in her National Day address by proposing peaceful dialogue between the two sides. All of those remarks are totally out of character with Tsai and Wu and reflect the deep choppy undercurrent in cross-strait relations.

For decades, the U.S., China and Taiwan are constantly weighing and shifting over three approaches to cross-strait relationship: “confrontation,” “procrastination,” and “negotiation.” Now Trump and Tsai have unmistakably chosen “confrontation.” Xi Jinping is the only one who has not made clear his choice.

It appears now that Xi may have completely closed the door to “negotiation” with Taiwan after Tsai’s involvement in the Hong Kong protests last year, her stern responses to China following the breakout of Covid-19, and her collaboration with Trump at his anti-China front this year.

“Procrastination?” Perhaps, but because Xi’s “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” and Tsai’s “Taiwan independence” cannot co-exist, the more secure Tsai is in Taiwan, the more insecure Xi would become in the Mainland. As Xi is to enter the first centennial of the Chinese Communist Party and his third term, “procrastination” of cross-strait relations will only put him more on strategic defensive, subject to the vicissitudes of U.S. and Taiwan behavior externally and indignant public opinion internally.

If the U.S. and China were to reset their relationship next year with Biden at the helms, cross-strait relations may procrastinate for a while longer. However, if the reset fails, Xi would be left with few options other than “confrontation”

Taiwan is given a grace period. Tsai administration should take advantage of this rare window to change course. Instead of pursuing independence, greater effort should be made on improving Taiwan’s economy and the people’s well-being. Otherwise, it would not be long before the playbook for “confrontation” comes onto the stage.

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