

Stay Alert on the U.S.-China-Taiwan Relations Next Year

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The big data of the traditional Chinese calendar seems to have borne out the legend that the year of *Gengzi*, every sixty years, has always proven to be eventful. In recent Chinese history, *Gengzi* featured the First Opium War in 1840, the Boxer Rebellion in 1900, and a great famine in 1960. This year, great damages have been inflicted upon public health worldwide, national economies, as well as the global strategic structure, to which Taiwan not only was a contributing factor but also swallowed its bitter fruit.

One significant legacy that President Donald Trump will leave behind is the U.S. policy towards China. He raised the vigilance of the Americans on the rise of China. But he has mostly shown emotions without coherent strategies and effective methods. Externally he offended allies all around. And internally he managed to frustrate and alienate large sections of the military, intelligence and diplomatic circles to such an unprecedented degree that he dented the U.S. almost as much as the People's Republic of China.

Perhaps because of this, the first batch of high-level appointments President-Elect Joseph Biden made is his national security team. They are all seasoned professionals and can be trusted to soon map out a new and feasible strategy towards China. Judging from publicly available information, the policy pros within the Democratic Party fall into three groups. The smallest number advocate "confrontation" *a la* Trump. Slightly more people seem to favor compromise, believing that through negotiations the U.S. and China should be able to find an equilibrium between their interests and strength. Most people seem to support the so-called "competitive coexistence"; that is, the United States and China compete on the basis of coexistence, and cooperation is not ruled out. Before the new China policy is to take shape, these pros will definitely factor in the attitudes of the U.S. allies and yet unpredictable international incidents.

Interestingly, before the new Biden administration is to make its first move, Beijing which has remained passive and defensive for most of the past four years suddenly took the initiative. An article by Fu Ying, the PRC's former vice minister of foreign affairs,

contributed an article to the *New York Times*, which was most certainly instigated by higher Chinese authorities. In the article Fu admitted that the U.S.-China relationship has suffered serious setbacks in recent years, and both sides are still suspicious of each other. She called on both to establish a relationship of “cooperative competition” and conduct “equal and candid negotiations.” This article mentioned Taiwan twice, urging the U.S. to respect the Chinese sense of national unity and avoid challenging China on the issue of Taiwan. She purposefully reminded the readers that “China’s growing navy has put some pressure on the United States in the Western Pacific” and raised the question “does America want to help Taiwan go independent?”

Beijing’s rare initiative reveals two things. One, the game the two great powers now play is strategic in nature, not economic as before, and what matters more is each side’s strength, not public opinion. This sharp turn is a reaction to Trump’s strategic offense. Beijing would actually prefer to procrastinate and continue to put economic development in primacy for a longer while. But to cope with the long-term challenges of the U.S., China had to reorient its policy more through the prism of strategy and politics. Fu’s article was thus an attempt at identifying the strategic differences between the U.S. and China and expressed hopes to manage them through negotiations.

Second, Beijing’s sense of urgency on Taiwan is abundantly clear. This change originated from the Tsai Ing-wen administration’s blatant actions in Taiwan’s domestic affairs and U.S.-Taiwan relations. The former has driven the governments of both sides of the Strait into greater hostility and pushed the peoples across the Strait into deeper alienation. The latter turned Taiwan into a piece – increasingly an offensive one - of U.S. Indo-Pacific strategic layout. From Beijing’s viewpoint, Taiwan is no longer an island that China could afford to wait leisurely for it to drop onto its lap. Taiwan has now become a strategic threat that must be properly dealt with.

After all, Taiwan is located in the center of the first island chain. If Taiwan is pinched by the United States, then the Chinese navy will be trapped within the island chain, and its aircraft carriers, however numerous, will be of no avail. On the contrary, if Beijing is to take back Taiwan, not only will it be able to sail eastward into the wide Pacific Ocean, but it could outflank the South China Sea to an extent making it difficult for the U.S. navy to reach there. In other words, for Beijing, Taiwan carries not only historical significance, but enormous strategic value as well; hence, is much more important strategically.

In terms of Chinese domestic politics, if the Taiwan issue remains pending while U.S.-Taiwan strategic cooperation continues to deepen, it would pose a serious threat to Xi

Jinping's goal of "rejuvenating the Chinese nation." If so, the Taiwan issue is very likely to be exploited by those who oppose Xi's third term. For the same reason, Taiwan might well be used by Xi to convince his opponents of his worthiness for a new term.

This much must be clear to Biden's strategists, so Taiwan is an inescapable issue for new U.S.-China relationship. In contrast to the Republicans who have put forward quite a few concrete ideas of "Taiwan cards" in the public domain, the Democrats seem to have so far rarely discussed Taiwan in detail. It appears likely that Biden's strategists will first evaluate his overall foreign policy within the constraints of domestic politics and budgets, and then move on to the specific China policy before the Taiwan issue is picked up.

On Taiwan, the new team may assess first of all how valuable the island is to America. For Beijing, this is an issue that requires no discussion. But in Washington, undeniably, there are divergent views. Second, American civilian and military specialists must jointly assess whether the U.S. military can realistically overcome the so-called "tyranny of geography" and the threat of China's hypersonic missiles. Finally, how much cost is the United States prepared to bear for the protection of Taiwan?

The Tsai administration has contributed to the new strategic conundrum for all three sides, placing its own administration as well the entire Taiwan up to the front of the agenda of U.S.-China strategic competition. In addition, President Tsai has to worry about China's "military adventurism" as she put it to the Hudson Institute lately. If the United States and China were to jump-start "equal and candid" negotiations, then Taiwan may be able to avoid the scourge of war and wait for new arrangements by big powers. If, unfortunately, the U.S. and China somehow cannot sit down for talks or if their talks break down, then it is not inconceivable for Beijing to deal with Taiwan unilaterally.

While we remain careful of *Gengzi* (year 2020), we must not take *Xinchou* (year 2021) lightly either.

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