

**Opinion-maker's Forum:**

**Taiwan under US–China Competition**

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Many people in Taiwan share the belief of this author that Taiwan can only be in good shape when the cross-strait relationship between Taiwan and mainland China is going well. But what sort of relationship between the United States and China that overarches the cross-strait relationship can be considered good for Taiwan?

During the Cold War era, US–China relations were "utterly awful," so Taiwan's security and economic situation was of course awful. In 1972, the United States and China signed the Shanghai Communiqué, and in 1979 established diplomatic relations. Their relationship suddenly became "really great" and Taiwan was abandoned, which, thus was bad. Relations that were “neither good nor bad; at times good, at times bad” during the subsequent four decades opened up the way for Taiwan's economic miracle, democratization, pragmatic diplomacy, and cross-strait reconciliation. Then, after Donald Trump took office, the US-China relationship suddenly soured. Whether this is a blessing or curse for Taiwan is worth examining.

Three things must be understood at the outset. First, the current nature of US–China relations is one of competition; it has not yet reached the level of confrontation or a New Cold War. This is because competition is usually based on hopes of obtaining maximum benefit at minimal cost, while confrontation more often than not involves a pursuit of victory mostly without regard for cost. At present, the Trump administration has

made it clear through its actions and intentions that it attaches great importance to cost. For example, the United States chose trade and technology as its battlefield because these are areas where it has the advantage. However, in others where it no longer has the upper hand, such as the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea, the United States from time to time displays plenty of bark but little bite. The US's alienation of one friendly country after another, such as Japan, the Republic of Korea, Great Britain, Germany, France, Canada and Mexico, in no way resembles actions stemming from a confrontation or New Cold War mentality.

Second, this competition will certainly be long-term, rather than short-term in nature. An on-guard mindset toward Beijing has arisen currently among policymakers in the US regardless of their political affiliation. This means that the United States will not abandon competition in the future regardless of which party is in power.

Third, the US's competitive motives stem mostly from fears that mainland China may usurp the US's global leadership position, and only secondly from worries about the challenge that the Chinese Communist Party's model of governance poses to democratic values. In the 1980s, Japan's total economic output reached two-thirds the level of that in the United States, after which the United States immediately took steps to put a stop to it. Nor did the US pull its punches because Japan was also a democratic country, which is clear evidence of what matters to it most. This time, Beijing has not been as easily cowed as Japan, nor is it as weak as the Soviet Union. Therefore, the United States is more anxious than ever, and is actively seeking a strategy of competition to gain the upper hand.

Will the United States or China prevail in the future? There is no quick answer to this enormous question. The theory of international relations sums up three factors that determine the rise and fall of great nations. The first is whether such a country accumulates or depletes its resources, the second is whether it innovates or transfers its technology, and the third is how well or badly it is governed. All three of these factors are implicit in the behavior of both the United States and China to date.

For the United States, the best defense has been offense, frequently making moves to conserve its resources on the one hand while suppressing China's scientific and technological development on the other. However, it is not always clear who is really in charge of the US government, so there is no apparent rhyme or reason to the moves it makes, its policy-making elite seem intent on tussling with the rest of the world while fighting tooth and nail among themselves, allowing the country's governance to slip into a tailspin, while unable to fight back internal anxiety and depression.

For mainland China, the best offense has been defense, parrying each US thrust, and wielding its political solidity to maintain a firm grip on the three major factors by which it will meet the long-term competition. Nevertheless, the United States still remains top dog, so Beijing also harbors great concerns. Whether the United States or China come out ahead in the future will surely be decided by how they fare in the competition regarding these three major factors, and which first makes a game-changing misstep.

The Taiwan issue is most likely to elicit a wrong move. Under normal circumstances, the United States and China both realize that Taiwan is the most central, complicated and nettlesome issue between them. Therefore,

both heavies have been extremely careful in dealing with this big problem in the past. However, this year, four abnormalities has presented themselves.

First, their aforementioned anxiety and mutual suspicion have greatly increased the difficulty of managing the Taiwan issue. Second, as the bone of contention between the two strong powers, Taiwan itself has repeatedly provoked friction between the two, touching a raw nerve between them, as well as internally within China. Third, this is the year that Tsai Ying-wen will start to seek a second term as President, after which Donald Trump will also open his campaign for re-election, followed by Xi Jinping potentially arranging for a third term. All three leaders are under pressure to avoid defeat, and the motivation to seek victory amidst such higher stakes is even stronger. No matter who makes the first false step, Taiwan will suffer the grievous, if not mortal consequences.

What is most dangerous is that some in Taiwan have consistently regarded the competition between the United States and China as confrontation. They mistakenly believe that the United States is willing to protect Taiwan at any cost, so tirelessly delight in manipulating the cross-strait relationship. They also continue to mislead supportive members of the Taiwan public by constantly construing this confrontation between the US and China as a basis for mustering courage. They have forgotten that while there is still disparity in might between the US and China at the global level, in the Taiwan Strait it is a far more even match. Taiwan's value to the United States and to mainland China is vastly different than what each of the two is determined to do about Taiwan. It is precisely because the US's valuation of and commitment to Taiwan is considerably less than China that, if the United States ever finds that it

cannot even keep up with its own problems, it could quite likely abandon Taiwan. Conversely, once the internal and external pressure for China becomes great enough, it will make Taiwan the subject of its ire.

In 1999, President Lee and then Advisor Tsai Ying-wen misjudged the situation, supposing that their "Two-State Theory" could pass muster with Washington and Beijing, but the result was political and military sanctions from the US and China. If the Tsai administration makes another blunder this year, it will be hard to be optimistic about what lies ahead for Taiwan.

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