CHINA'S PERCEPTIONS OF U.S. INTENTIONS TOWARD TAIWAN

How Hostile a Hegemon?

_____ Andrew Bingham Kennedy
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Abstract

While few Chinese observers currently suspect that Washington seeks formal Taiwanese independence, a sizable majority believes the United States is striving to preserve Taiwan's de facto separation to check China's rise. This view is both unduly pessimistic and destabilizing. Accordingly, Washington should work to correct it.

Keywords: Taiwan, China, cross-strait relations, U.S.-China relations, perceptions

How resilient is the current peace in the Taiwan Strait? Since the end of the Cold War, American analysts have focused on China's military modernization as an ominous sign of instability to come. As the People's Republic of China (PRC) invests in advanced means of power projection—from more-accurate missiles to stealthier submarines to anti-satellite capabilities—it acquires new means of coercing Taiwan and complicating American intervention in the event of a conflict. Taiwan is adapting to the mainland's modernization, to be sure, but the island is struggling to keep up. Although China's emerging capabilities do not rival those of the United States, Chinese strategists express confidence that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) could still pose a serious challenge for U.S. forces in a conflict over Taiwan, citing the

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political and logistical constraints such an intervention would face.¹ Indeed, the PLA has a proud history of fighting superior opponents that goes back to the Chinese Revolution and, more poignantly for Americans, to the Korean War.

In response to China's growing capabilities, the United States is reviving its military contacts with Taiwan and offering it new kinds of weapon systems. The United States has normalized consultations on arms sales, become involved in Taiwanese defense reform, expanded educational and training exchanges, and increased opportunities for strategic dialogue with high-level Taiwanese officials.² The Pentagon also sends American officers to Taiwan to observe military exercises and conduct capability assessments. More broadly, the U.S. is deepening its strategic cooperation with Japan and augmenting its military presence in the Western Pacific.

Although U.S. officials hope these moves will help stabilize the situation, the impact of such measures depends largely on how they are interpreted in Beijing. The U.S. has disavowed support for Taiwanese independence, but China's leaders also worry about permanent informal separation—a much more realistic goal for Taiwanese nationalists. As its 2000 Taiwan White Paper made clear, China feels entitled to use force against Taiwan in response to the latter's "indefinitely" postponing unification talks.³ Although Chinese President Hu Jintao has downplayed this precondition for using force since coming to power, there is no guarantee that he (or his successors) will continue to do so in the future. Indeed, the Anti-Secession Law passed by the National People's Congress in March 2005 kept this precondition very much alive by justifying force if the "possibilities for a peaceful reunification should be completely exhausted."⁴ Accordingly, the perception that Washington and Taipei were conspiring to maintain Taiwan's de facto independence forever would be deeply disquieting to Beijing.

To gain some insight into how China interprets U.S. Taiwan policy, this article systematically explores the motives Chinese observers see behind American support for Taiwan today. Although Beijing's dissatisfaction with Washington's support for Taiwan is no secret, the way in which Chinese analysts explain U.S. policy remains largely unexamined. The question here is not why U.S. support for Taiwan has recently increased but a deeper one: why does the United States care about Taiwan's security at all? This article documents the existence

1. Thomas J. Christensen, "Posing Problems without Catching Up: China's Rise and Challenges for U.S. Security Policy," *International Security* 25:4 (Spring 2001), pp. 5–40.

2. For a summary of these developments, see Michael S. Chase, "U.S.-Taiwan Security Cooperation: Enhancing an Unofficial Relationship," in Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, *Dangerous Strait: The U.S.-Taiwan-China Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 162–85.

3. "Taiwan White Paper," *Beijing Review* 43:10 (March 6, 2000), p. 21.

4. "Anti-Secession Law Adopted by NPC (Full Text)," *China Daily*, March 14, 2005, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-03/14/content_424643.htm>.

of three different perspectives on this question within China. As elaborated below, the mainstream view is that the U.S. supports Taiwan primarily as a means of countering the mainland's growing power, a perception I term the "Nervous Hegemon" view. There are also more sanguine interpretations of U.S. policy, however. In particular, an iconoclastic minority believes the U.S. protects Taiwan mainly because the long history of the relationship makes it difficult to abandon the island. Among other factors, these analysts stress Washington's interest in preserving its reputation as a reliable security partner, a reputation at stake because of long-standing American support for Taiwan. Given the emphasis here on the constraints imposed by the history of the relationship, I term this perception the "Entangled Ally" view. In addition, some analysts believe that the U.S. is genuinely interested in preserving Taiwanese democracy, perhaps with an eye toward using Taiwan's example to inspire political liberalization on the mainland. I refer to this perception as the "Democratic Missionary" view.

These three views are not mutually exclusive. But it is important to understand how much support each of them commands in China because they inform divergent assessments of how the U.S. will behave in the future. The relatively widespread Nervous Hegemon view, for example, implies U.S. antipathy to the prospect of unification, if not necessarily support for Taiwanese independence. Although the U.S. cannot dictate political outcomes on Taiwan, it does have a number of means of influencing cross-strait relations. In this view, Washington will use these levers to keep Taiwan and the mainland divided. To the extent that the U.S. succeeds, China will be forced to choose between indefinite separation and using coercive measures to promote unification.

The Entangled Ally and Democratic Missionary views have less unsettling implications. To be sure, if the U.S. genuinely seeks to preserve Taiwanese democracy, then it is unlikely to be enthusiastic about unification as long as the mainland remains autocratic. Nonetheless, it is possible to imagine scenarios under which Washington could accept closer cross-strait political ties or even unification, depending on the particular arrangements involved. Moreover, should the mainland begin to democratize and do so in a relatively stable manner, U.S. discomfort with the idea of unification should diminish.

If the U.S. is best seen as somehow "entangled" by its relationship with Taiwan, there would seem to be even less reason for Washington to fear the prospect of unification. Of course, given its desire to maintain its reputation for resolve, the U.S. would still seek to counter Chinese coercion of Taiwan through continuing arms sales, military deployments, and official statements. In the event of an attack on the island, such concerns could even motivate U.S. intervention, particularly if the assault was seen as unprovoked. Nonetheless, it is hard to see why an "entangled" U.S. would object to unification if the process were peaceful and consensual. Even if U.S. allies in the region viewed the

matter in a different light, it seems unlikely that they would be able to dictate American policy on the issue.

In addition to these implications, Chinese interpretations of U.S. Taiwan policy matter because they inform more general perceptions of American intentions toward China. As prominent Chinese analyst Chu Shulong has argued, "The position the U.S. takes on the Taiwan issue determines the essence of American strategy toward China, and thus determines the quality and status of U.S.-China relations."⁵ Accordingly, when Beijing is pessimistic about U.S. policy toward Taiwan, it tends to take a darker view of Washington's stance on a range of issues, including regional efforts to combat terrorism, the alliance with Japan, and the development of new military technologies.⁶ Grimmer views of long-term U.S. intentions toward Taiwan can thus complicate Sino-American relations across the board—not in the distant future, but today.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. The next section surveys Chinese explanations for U.S. support for Taiwan in the post-Cold War era. This section draws upon interviews with Chinese officials and foreign policy analysts conducted in 2005 and 2006, as well as recent articles and books on the subject. Interviews are essential for gauging the real range of opinion on sensitive subjects because Chinese analysts sometimes prefer not to make soft-line views known in print.⁷ In this case, the interviewees included some of China's most influential America-watchers, Taiwan experts, and strategic analysts, both inside and outside the government.⁸ Many of the non-official analysts consulted are actively engaged as advisors to the government on policy toward Taiwan or the United States. To protect the privacy of these individuals, they are not identified by name.⁹

The second half of this article assesses the accuracy of these perceptions insofar as possible. This assessment draws upon interviews with former U.S.

5. Chu Shulong, "Lengzhanhou Zhongmei Shuangbian he Diqu Zhanlue yu Anquan Guanxi" [Post-cold war U.S.-China bilateral and regional strategies and security relations], *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* [Contemporary International Relations] 5 (2000), p. 12.

6. Thomas J. Christensen, "'Beijing's Views of Taiwan and the United States in Early 2002: The Renaissance of Pessimism,'" *China Leadership Monitor* 3 (Summer 2002), p. 1.

7. See Philip C. Saunders, "China's America Watchers," *China Quarterly* 161 (March 2000), p. 45.

8. To ensure a relatively representative sample, I interviewed 26 individuals from a range of official and non-official institutions. These institutions included the State Council Taiwan Affairs Office, the Academy of Military Science, the Central Party School, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, National Defense University, the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), Qinghua University, Beijing University, China Foreign Affairs University, People's University, Fudan University, and the Shanghai Institute for East Asian Studies.

9. The use of confidential interviews is of necessity a common practice in the study of Chinese security policy. For examples, see Robert Ross, "The 1995–96 Taiwan Strait Confrontation: Coercion, Credibility, and the Use of Force," *International Security* 25:2 (Fall 2000), pp. 87–123; Christensen, "Posing Problems"; and Saunders, "China's America Watchers."

officials as well as my own analysis of U.S. behavior. It also weighs the specific arguments made by Chinese observers to justify particular interpretations of U.S. policy. To the extent that Chinese analysts exaggerate the degree of conflict between Chinese and American goals, it is important to identify the specific misperceptions that exist and to correct them if possible. On the basis of this analysis, I conclude that most Chinese observers attribute greater hostility to Washington than is warranted at present. In the conclusion, I suggest how the U.S. might make its goals on the Taiwan issue more clear in the future.

Explaining the U.S. Commitment to Taiwan: Three Views

Although the Cold War context in which the U.S. commitment to Taiwan originated has disappeared, the U.S. continues to underwrite Taiwan's security today. What explains Washington's continuing interest in the island? Given the history of the American relationship with Taiwan and the current complexity and ambiguity of U.S.-China relations, there are a number of ways to answer this question. The research conducted for this article points to three different views within Chinese policy circles. As described above, the U.S. is alternately portrayed as a "Nervous Hegemon," an "Entangled Ally," or a "Democratic Missionary." In reality, of course, U.S. thinking about Taiwan is unlikely to be as clear-cut as these stylized images suggest, and many Chinese observers recognize that the notion of a single "American interest" in Taiwan simplifies matters dramatically. Even so, the observers interviewed for this article varied widely in the emphasis they placed on different kinds of motivations for U.S. policy, and they often singled out one factor in particular. Moreover, because these three images have such contrasting implications for U.S.-China relations, it is important to understand the relative plausibility that different Chinese observers attach to them. I consider each of these perspectives in turn below.

The Nervous Hegemon

Most Chinese observers attribute current U.S. support for Taiwan primarily to a fear of China's rising power in the post-Cold War era. This view prevailed among both official and non-official interlocutors interviewed for this article. It also dominates the printed discourse on the subject.¹⁰ Reinforcing this finding,

10. For examples, see Wang Fan, "Meiguo de Taihai Weichi Xianzhuang Zhengce de Tanxi" [An analysis of the United States policy of maintaining the status quo in the Taiwan Strait], *Tai-pingyang Xuebao* [Pacific Journal] 12 (2005), pp. 36-45; Liu Jianfei, "Meiguo dui Hua Zhanlue de Zhuanbian Quxiang" [The changing direction of U.S. strategy toward China], *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* [World Economics and Politics] 2 (2005), p. 34; Wu Xianbin, "Bushe Zhengfu dui Tai Zhengce de Tedian ji qi Yuanyin" [The characteristics and causes of the Bush administration's policy toward Taiwan], *Dangdai Yatai* [Contemporary Asia-Pacific] 3 (2004), pp. 16-23.

Chinese scholars often describe this perspective as the mainstream view within the Chinese government, military, and academic community.¹¹ In fact, even those who criticize this view as too pessimistic see it as the dominant perspective within China. In general, this motivation is attributed to both the Clinton and current Bush administrations, although some suggest it has been particularly pronounced in the latter case.¹²

Those who take this view vary as to what they think Washington is nervous about. Nonetheless, there is a general perception that unification would enhance China's overall power and remove a point of leverage for the United States. This outcome is thus seen as highly undesirable from Washington's perspective. In practice, therefore, U.S. policy is often said to consist of "four nos": "no unification, no independence, no war, and no harmony" (*bu tong, bu du, bu zhan, bu he*).¹³ Although the U.S. might prefer formal independence for Taiwan, most Chinese observers believe that Washington sees this option as too costly—and unnecessary, given Taiwan's de facto independence of Beijing. Similarly, the U.S. is seen as reluctant to fight a war with China over Taiwan, although some suspect that Washington might prefer war if the only alternative were Taiwan's unification with the mainland. Lastly, the U.S. is seen as averse to increasing harmony between Taipei and Beijing, instead preferring moderate levels of tension it can exploit.

These comparatively pessimistic observers cite many different kinds of evidence to justify this view of U.S. policy. Some point to official U.S. publications, such as the *Quadrennial Defense Review*, that call for maintaining U.S. military primacy, and argue that this implies antipathy to cross-strait reconciliation.¹⁴ One scholar cited as evidence the commentary on the Taiwan issue from conservative think tanks in Washington. While noting that such organizations do not represent mainstream opinion, he argued that "the Bush administration is pretty right wing, so people just think that [such organizations] are telling the truth."¹⁵ One military officer simply sees such a stance as rational:

11. One senior scholar estimated that roughly 90% of Chinese analysts believe that the United States is unofficially opposed to unification in any form. Interview by author, Beijing, April 25, 2006.

12. For a prominent articulation of this view during the later years of Clinton administration, see Su Ge, *Meiguo Duihua Zhengce yu Taiwan Wenti* [U.S. China policy and the Taiwan problem] (Beijing: World Knowledge Press, 1998), pp. 810–11. For additional examples from this time period, see Yong Deng, "Hegemon on the Offensive: Chinese Perspectives on United States Global Strategy," *Political Science Quarterly* 116:3 (Fall 2001), p. 354, fn. 42.

13. For example, see Xia Liping, "Meiguo dui Hua Zhanlue ji qi Neizai Maodun" [U.S. China strategy and its inherent contradictions], *Dangdai Yatai* [Contemporary Asia-Pacific] 2 (2004), p. 8. In some cases, the expression is abbreviated "no unification, no independence" (*bu tong, bu du*).

14. Wu Xinbo, "The Taiwan Issue and United States Asia/Pacific Security Strategy," *American Foreign Policy Interests* 24:3 (June 2002), pp. 231–32.

15. Interview by author, Shanghai, June 3, 2005.

"If I were President of the United States, I would not want to see the mainland and Taiwan unify."¹⁶

Notably, there seem to be both soft- and hard-line versions of the Nervous Hegemon view. Those espousing the softer view see the U.S. as opposed to unification until it becomes more certain of China's long-term intentions. These individuals often describe the U.S. as using Taiwan to "guard against" (*fang-fan*) China's rise. As noted expert Xu Shiquan has put it, "Taiwan is a card the U.S. uses to contain the development of Chinese power. If the U.S. is apprehensive about growing Chinese power and believes China will one day challenge its 'leading position,' it will not let the Taiwan card in its hand go."¹⁷

Implicit in this view is the idea that U.S. support for Taiwan might be tempered, if not eliminated, if Washington could be reassured about China's future ambitions. Hard-line analysts, in contrast, portray the U.S. as more certain and deliberate. One official accused Washington of "using Taiwan to contain China" (*yi Tai zhi Hua*).¹⁸ In this view unification is simply not in the U.S. interest, given the extent to which it would benefit a rival power.

Proponents of the Nervous Hegemon view often suggest the U.S. would try to subvert cross-strait relations to stave off the possibility of unification, although the U.S. capacity for such subversion remains a matter of dispute. In any case, these observers agree that the U.S. would be extremely careful in taking such a step, given the sensitivity of the issue. Several individuals interviewed for this article suggested that Washington might interfere through provocative arms sales packages or by allowing Taiwanese officials to make high-profile visits to the United States. One scholar added that the U.S. could prod Japan to make pro-Taiwan gestures, which would sow discord between Taipei and Beijing while directing the mainland's ire against another country. Japan in turn could defend such moves by explaining that it is under pressure from the United States, thereby complicating matters for Beijing as it contemplates a response.¹⁹ Whatever the American choice of means, there is real concern that the U.S. will be "a big obstacle" (*yi da zhang'ai*) to unifying with Taiwan in the future.²⁰

16. Personal communication, August 18, 2005.

17. Xu Shiquan, "Shou Tai Wuqi: Dui Zhong Mei Guanxi Shashangli Bu Jian" [Selling weapons to Taiwan: The injuriousness to U.S.-China relations is not decreasing], *Guoji Xianqu Daobao* [International Herald Leader] (Beijing), November 5, 2004, p. 1.

18. Interview by author, Beijing, April 27, 2006.

19. On this point, see Hu Jiping, "Mei Ri 'Gongtong Zhanlue Mubiao' yu Riben She Tai Li-chang Bianhua" [The U.S.-Japan 'common strategic objective' and Japan's changing position on interference in Taiwan], *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* [Contemporary International Relations] 3 (2005), p. 36.

20. Tao Wenzhao, "Meiguo dui Taiwan Zhengce de Yanbian" [The evolution of U.S. policy toward Taiwan], *Zhongguo Shehuikexueyuan Xueshu Zixun Weiyuanhui Jikan* [Collected papers of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Academic Consultative Committee] 2 (2005), p. 536.

On the question of whether the U.S. ultimately seeks Taiwanese independence, Chinese views seem to have evolved. The 1995 decision by Washington to permit then-Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui to visit the U.S. sparked particularly dark appraisals of U.S. intentions. According to one well-placed scholar, at that time “the mainstream view was that the U.S. supported Taiwanese independence” (*zhuliu de kanfa shi Meiguo zhichi Taidu*).²¹ The same individual witnessed Jiang Zemin declare in a private meeting at the time that “there is no Taiwan problem, only a U.S.-China problem” (*meiyou Taiwan wenti, zhi you Zhong-Mei guanxi wenti*). This extremely pessimistic view was apparently moderated following U.S. disavowals of support for Taiwanese independence.

Today, it is unclear what proportion of Chinese observers still suspects that the U.S. hopes one day to achieve formal Taiwanese independence. One scholar argued that “most” Chinese observers see this as the ultimate U.S. goal, notwithstanding the disavowals of the Clinton and Bush administrations.²² Nonetheless, I did not document much belief that the U.S. saw such an outcome as realistic, even in the long term. Moreover, none of the other individuals consulted for this study saw the mainstream view as quite so pessimistic. Perhaps the most reasonable conclusion at this point is that there is no strong belief that the U.S. ultimately favors Taiwanese independence, but such a view could readily reemerge in the future.

The Entangled Ally

Most Chinese observers are skeptical that the U.S. is best understood as “entangled” by its long-standing relationship with Taiwan. To be sure, many individuals acknowledge that the U.S. reputation as a reliable ally could suffer if it reduced support for Taiwan, particularly in light of Washington’s historic support for the island. Yet, this is typically seen as a secondary concern. One scholar dismissed it as “a very small part” (*hen xiao de yi bufen*) of the U.S. interest in Taiwan, while a military officer belittled it as “not a core interest” (*bushi hexin liyi*).²³

Nonetheless, there are several noteworthy exceptions to this general tendency. One scholar argued that the history of the relationship with Taiwan made it difficult for the U.S. to disengage. Another was more specific, citing the Taiwan Relations Act as a political commitment that the U.S. could not easily ignore. A third maintained that the primary U.S. interest was in the stability of East Asia as a region. Successful Chinese coercion of Taiwan would threaten this stability by undermining the U.S. reputation as a security partner, but peaceful unification would not.

21. Interview by author, Beijing, June 9, 2005.

22. Interview by author, Beijing, June 19, 2005.

23. Interviews by author, Beijing, June 13, 2005, and April 23, 2006.

While these more sanguine observers understand that their views diverge from the mainstream, they remain unfazed by their minority status. In fact, these individuals were often quick to dismiss more pessimistic assessments, at least in private. Referring to the widespread view that U.S. Taiwan policy is part of a larger containment policy, one scholar noted resignedly that "there are many misperceptions in the U.S.-China relationship."²⁴ Another senior scholar was more blunt, suggesting that the opinions of most Chinese analysts on this issue "are without basis" (*meiyou yiju*).²⁵ In this expert's view, most Chinese analysts see U.S. policy toward Asia as totally driven by its relationship with China and fail to understand that the U.S. has other priorities as well.

To be sure, these more optimistic observers do not completely dismiss the Nervous Hegemon view. Yet, they tend to attribute this highly realpolitik motivation to individual China hawks in the Bush administration or the Congress, rather than the U.S. government as a whole. Moreover, in some cases the influence of these more hawkish individuals is seen as having declined from an apex when President Bush took office in 2001. Although this is partly a function of the administration's discovery of China's strategic utility after 9/11, it is also a function of broader trends. One scholar suggested that certain Bush administration officials took office with a "Cold War mind-set" inherited from their last experience in government in the 1980s or early 1990s. In his view, this mentality has faded as these officials have gained experience working with China in a post-Cold War context.²⁶

The Entangled Ally view can be found in print, though not as easily as the Nervous Hegemon perspective. One prominent expert has noted that American interlocutors stress credibility concerns as driving U.S. interest in Taiwan, without contradicting this explanation for U.S. policy.²⁷ Other writers note the reluctance of U.S. policymakers to "abandon" Taiwan in its hour of need, presenting the issue more as a moral aversion to breaking a promise than a concern over reputation.²⁸ Nonetheless, this view seems to be limited to more-academic publications; even there, reputational and moral concerns are generally not cited as the most important reasons for continuing U.S. support. Instead, it appears that those who stress these kinds of motivations prefer not to share their views in print.

24. Interview by author, Shanghai, June 1, 2005.

25. Interview by author, Beijing, June 19, 2005.

26. Interview by author, Beijing, April 18, 2006.

27. It was noted that the point was highly controversial, however. See Wang Jisi, "Zhong Mei Weiji Xingwei Bijiao Fenxi" [A comparison of U.S. and Chinese crisis behavior], *Meiguo Yanjiu* [American Studies Quarterly] 19:2 (Summer 2005), pp. 33–34.

28. Sun Zhe, "Meiguo zai Tai de 'Teshu Liyi' de Jian'gou" [The construction of the United States's 'special interest' in Taiwan], *Taiwan Yanjiu Jikan* [Taiwan Research Quarterly] (Xiamen, PRC) 1 (2005), p. 25.

The Democratic Missionary

Chinese observers generally do not see the U.S. as primarily concerned about the protection of Taiwanese democracy or the promotion of democratic values in Asia. They often note that Washington supported a repressive regime on Taiwan for decades during the Cold War, which makes it difficult to see the U.S. interest in Taiwanese democracy as a fundamental issue today. Nonetheless, several individuals interviewed for this study cited democracy promotion as a supplemental concern for the United States. Some interlocutors saw this concern as bolstering congressional support for Taiwan, especially in the liberal wing of the Democratic Party. One official suggested that Taiwan was a “democratic window” (*minzhu chuanghu*) through which the U.S. hoped to promote political reform on the mainland. A prominent scholar went so far as to suggest that “deep in the mind of the United States, Taiwan is a democracy, and Taiwan is a friend.”²⁹ Yet, even this individual hesitated to conclude that this was Washington’s most important concern.

The Democratic Missionary view can sometimes be found in print. Typically, U.S. interest in Taiwan’s democracy is presented as a secondary concern that supplements goals such as checking China’s rise.³⁰ This accords with the opinions expressed in the interviews for this study, as noted above. Yet, there is also some evidence of self-censorship. One supporter of the Democratic Missionary view confessed that he did not publish his ideas lest he be labeled “pro-Washington.”³¹

Besides doubting that protecting Taiwanese democracy was Washington’s top priority, most individuals consulted for this article discounted the notion that democratization on the mainland would greatly improve Beijing’s relations with Washington and Taipei. In fact, some worried that democratization in China would be destabilizing and that the resulting regime would be more nationalistic and less predictable than before. Under such circumstances, a democratizing China might actually seem more threatening to Taiwan and the United States, rather than less.

In sum, a majority of Chinese observers appear to subscribe to a relatively gloomy interpretation of U.S. support for Taiwan. Although there is little belief that the U.S. seeks Taiwanese independence, many observers believe that

29. Interview by author, Beijing, June 15, 2005.

30. For example, see Wang Jisi, “Sanshi Nian lai Zhong Mei Guanxi de Bian yu Bu Bian” [Change and continuity in the past 30 years of U.S.-China Relations], *Zhongguo Dangzheng Ganbu Luntan* [China Administrative Cadres’ Forum] 7 (2002), pp. 36–39. For an atypical analysis that stresses U.S. interest in Taiwanese democracy, see Xin Qiang and Ni Shixiong, “Xingweiti ‘Shenfen’ yu Dui Wai Zhengce: Mei Tai Guanxi de Jian’gouzhuji Fenxi” [Actor ‘identity’ and foreign policy: A constructivist analysis of U.S.-Taiwan relations], *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* 1 (2006), pp. 22–28.

31. Personal communication, April 12, 2006.

Washington seeks to delay or prevent unification. For unification to occur, China will thus have to overcome implicit American resistance. Despite this widespread pessimism, a significant minority sees U.S. intentions as more compatible with Chinese interests. These individuals typically attribute continuing U.S. protection of Taiwan to the history of the relationship and in particular, to Washington's desire to maintain its reputation as a reliable ally.

In addition to the three main views highlighted above, Chinese observers sometimes offer other perspectives on U.S. policy toward Taiwan. Some note the economic benefits that the U.S. derives from its arms sales to Taiwan, highlighting the large package the Bush administration has offered.³² Yet, this particular motivation seems most relevant to explaining Washington's interest in selling expensive weapons systems to Taiwan. It is less clear that this incentive can explain Washington's apparent willingness to risk a highly costly war with China over the island. Other Chinese observers insist that American policy cannot be well understood if the U.S. is simply treated as a unitary actor; one recent study of U.S. arms sales to Taiwan explores the role of bureaucratic and inter-branch politics in Washington.³³ Lastly, one analyst saw Washington as unsure of what it had at stake, arguing that "the U.S. has a policy, but not a strategy, toward Taiwan."³⁴ In his view, U.S. policy is best seen as reactive, rather than goal-oriented.

Naturally, the views of Chinese observers are fluid. Some have become more pessimistic over time, especially as the U.S. military relationship with Taiwan has deepened in recent years. Others have become more optimistic after visiting the United States. One military officer said he started to take American interest in Taiwan's democracy more seriously after talking with U.S.-based sinologists. More generally, the view that the U.S. ultimately seeks formal Taiwanese independence has apparently abated in recent years despite its prevalence in the 1990s.

Perception or Misperception? Assessing Chinese Views

If the pessimism that prevails among Chinese observers is correct, the U.S. and China are doomed to struggle over Taiwan's future, seeking to influence Taiwanese politicians and voters in very different directions. Although military conflict might not be inevitable, it would seem to be more likely—at least

32. Niu Jun, "Meiguo dui Tai Zhengce de Yanbian: Yige Lishi de Sikao" [The evolution of U.S. Taiwan policy: A historical contemplation], *Taipingyang Xuebao* 2 (2005), p. 42.

33. See Zhang Qingmin, *Meiguo dui Tai Junshou Zhengce Yanjiu: Juece de Shijiao* [Research on U.S. arms sales to Taiwan: Perspectives on policy-making] (Beijing: World Knowledge Press, 2006).

34. Interview by author, Beijing, June 23, 2005.

if Beijing feared it was losing this political tug of war with Washington. Yet, if this gloomy view is incorrect, Washington has a powerful interest in making this clear to Beijing. Unwarranted pessimism on China's part is dangerous and should be extinguished whenever possible.

Of course, divining the "true" motivations behind U.S. Taiwan policy in the post-Cold War era is no simple task. Ideally, one would seek evidence for and against different types of strategic motivations in internal documents from the Clinton and Bush administrations concerning the Taiwan issue. Unfortunately, given the sensitivity and recency of the policies under discussion, such an approach is not feasible here. Even with unfettered access to classified material, it might still be difficult to attribute an overall motivation to an organization as large as the U.S. government. Although political scientists often assume that governments make decisions as unitary actors, the reality is obviously much more complicated.

The following analysis, therefore, adopts a more modest goal. Rather than attempting to document definitively the most important motivations behind U.S. policy, I assess the plausibility of particular Chinese perceptions. To do so, I draw upon interviews with former U.S. officials as well as my own examination of U.S. behavior. I also consider several justifications given by Chinese observers for their interpretations of U.S. policy. To ensure a relatively balanced picture, the discussion relies on interviews with former officials from both the Clinton and Bush administrations as well as from the Departments of State (DOS) and Defense (DOD), and the National Security Council (NSC). In aggregate, the analysis strongly suggests that most Chinese analysts hold excessively pessimistic views of U.S. policy. I examine the specific misperceptions in turn below.

Taiwan's Democratic Appeal

Whereas Chinese observers typically downplay U.S. interest in Taiwanese democracy, former officials from both the Clinton and Bush administrations cite Taiwan's democratic system as a powerful force behind U.S. interest in the island today. One individual called Taiwan's democracy "enormously important," and several cited it as the single most important factor overall behind U.S. support.³⁵ As pointed out above, Chinese pundits often justify their skepticism on this score by noting that the U.S. supported Taiwan even when the latter's political system was highly autocratic. Nonetheless, the fact that democracy did not motivate U.S. interest in Taiwan during the Cold War does not mean that it could not do so today, under very different circumstances. One official argued that the collapse of the Soviet Union gave the U.S. more leeway to

35. Author's interview with Daniel Blumenthal, former senior country director for China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Mongolia, Office for International Security Affairs, DOD, August 3, 2005.

pursue its ideals in foreign policy—just as Taiwan’s political liberalization was unfolding.³⁶

Taiwan’s democratic appeal appears to work on a number of levels. First, it shapes how some U.S. officials view Taiwan’s intentions and reliability as a partner. One veteran of both the Clinton DOD and Bush DOS suggested that Taiwan “is a like-minded democracy and friend, which puts them in a camp of countries that would work with us on a range of issues.”³⁷ Of course, this does not mean that U.S. officials see American and Taiwanese interests as identical, as bilateral frictions over Taiwanese gestures toward formal independence attest. “We have principled respect for Taiwanese democracy,” another official put it, “but we don’t have the luxury of accepting everything that is done in the name of Taiwanese democracy.”³⁸

Second, the democracy issue “resonates” in the American political system in ways that make it difficult for the U.S. to abandon the island.³⁹ While American opinion polls concerning Taiwan’s security offer varying results depending on the questions asked, clear majorities consistently maintain that the U.S. has a “vital interest” in Taiwan. There is little question that Taiwan’s democracy boosts the island’s image among the American public.⁴⁰ Indeed, even as human rights abuses under martial law in the 1980s raised questions about U.S. relations with Taiwan, “political liberalization on Taiwan has facilitated the emergence of a broad consensus in Congress regarding U.S. policy.”⁴¹ In fact, then-Taiwan President Chiang Ching-kuo launched political reforms in the mid-1980s partly in response to urging from U.S. officials, who stressed democratization as the best means of retaining American support in the future.⁴² This strategy appears to have paid off, as the interviews for this study attest.

Third, some U.S. officials believe that Taiwan can serve as a model of democratization for other countries in Asia, particularly China. As one Clinton DOD official put it, “Taiwan’s existence is a constant reminder to the PRC leadership of the possibilities for reform and democratization. While it is currently

36. Author’s interview with Richard Bush, former chairman and managing director of the American Institute in Taiwan, September 22, 2005.

37. Author’s interview with Randall Schriver, former deputy assistant secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, DOS, September 13, 2005.

38. Author’s interview with Richard Bush.

39. Author’s interview with Robert Suettinger, former NSC director of Asian Affairs, August 7, 2005.

40. A 2002 Harris Interactive poll of U.S. citizens found that 65% of respondents viewed Taiwan as a “vital interest” of the United States. See Public Opinion Online, “Worldviews 2002 Survey,” October 2, 2002, accessible through “Polls and Surveys” in the Reference section of <<http://www.lexis-nexis.com>>.

41. Richard Bush, “Domestic Political Considerations That Shape United States Policy toward China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan,” in David M. Lampton and Alfred D. Wilhelm (eds.), *United States and China Relations at a Crossroads* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1995), p. 152.

42. Author’s interview with Richard Bush.

not appreciated in Beijing, Taiwan is a laboratory for reform, and these experiments have relevance and resonance for the mainland.”⁴³

In fact, the Clinton administration’s NSC considered various potential means of promoting the spread of democracy from Taiwan to the mainland, only to conclude that political liberalization in China was realistic only in the long-term. Even so, NSC officials made the case to Taiwanese interlocutors that the island could serve as an example for the mainland, although they did not find the Taiwanese overly receptive to the idea at that time.⁴⁴ In the Bush administration, officials with the State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor have met with Taiwanese experts in an effort to gain more insight into Taiwan’s democratization—and how exportable it may be.⁴⁵

To be sure, Chinese skeptics counter that the U.S. has not traditionally emphasized the “Taiwan model” in its public diplomacy. This is not surprising. First, there is no universal agreement among U.S. officials that the Taiwan model is applicable to the mainland. Some see Taiwan as a useful template, but others believe that political reform in China will unfold according to its own logic. More important, even those officials who believe Taiwan can serve as a model for the mainland worry that overt U.S. attention to this point will be counterproductive. As a former NSC official noted, any American campaign to promote the spread of Taiwan-style democracy to the PRC could be denounced by Beijing as “peaceful evolution,” a reference to U.S. Cold War efforts to undermine communism on the mainland.⁴⁶

Despite these reservations, there are indications that the traditional U.S. reluctance to call attention to Taiwan’s example may be fading. In November 2005, while in Kyoto, Japan, President Bush made a point of lauding Taiwan as a “Chinese” democracy: “Like South Korea, modern Taiwan is free and democratic and prosperous. By embracing freedom at all levels, Taiwan has delivered prosperity to its people and created a free and democratic Chinese society.” After these remarks, Bush added a call for greater political openness in China: “By meeting the legitimate demands of its citizens for freedom and openness, China’s leaders can help their country grow into a modern, prosperous, and confident nation.”⁴⁷

These statements marked a clear departure from past U.S. practice, which tended to encourage reform in China without mentioning Taiwan. It remains

43. Author’s interview with Kurt Campbell, former deputy assistant secretary of defense for East Asia, October 11, 2005.

44. Author’s interview with Robert Suettinger.

45. Author’s interview with Randall Schriver.

46. Author’s interview with Robert Suettinger.

47. “George W. Bush’s Remarks in Kyoto, as Delivered,” *Federal Document Clearing House (FDCH) Political Transcripts*, November 16, 2005, <http://web.lexis-nexis.com.ezp2.harvard.edu/universe/document?_m=d8f026049bc8b612c0cd0621d4326b8e&_docnum=2&wchp=dGLbVlb-zSkVb&_md5=317806c500701dcb94de4055f9fc0e15>.

to be seen how this new approach, if sustained, will be interpreted in Beijing. The results of this study suggest it has yet to make a significant impression.

In keeping with the emphasis on democracy, some American officials suggest that the U.S. would not have great difficulty accepting unification between Taiwan and a democratic regime on the mainland. Although there might be some concerns about issues such as the security of shipping lanes and the transfer of American defense technology from Taiwan to the mainland, these would be countered by rising perceptions of the mainland as a more benevolent actor. As one former DOD official argued, "There would be concerns, but over time, it would [be] easier to work out an accommodation of these concerns" with a democratic regime.⁴⁸ In fact, other former U.S. officials believed that the Bush administration would accept unification with a non-democratic regime on the mainland as long as the particular arrangements did not undermine Taiwan's system and were acceptable to Taiwanese voters.⁴⁹

Credibility Concerns

Most Chinese analysts downplay, if not dismiss, the role of credibility concerns in motivating U.S. interest in Taiwan. U.S. officials, however, often take a different view. They note that the U.S. continues to rely heavily on East Asian allies and suggest that credibility concerns surrounding these relationships play a role in Taiwan policy. As two former Clinton DOD officials have argued:

Washington's official relationship with Beijing on the one hand and its unofficial relationship with Taipei on the other represent perhaps the most complex foreign-policy balancing act in the world today. At stake are a number of core U.S. foreign policy goals: the promotion of democracy, *the preservation of U.S. credibility* [emphasis added], loyalty to traditional allies and friends, the engagement and integration of an emerging power into the international system, and the maintenance of peace and stability in Asia as a whole.⁵⁰

Notably, Washington's concerns are not limited to maintaining a reputation for resolve in the face of pressure. American officials want the U.S. to be seen not only as a reliable ally but also as a prudent and responsible actor. Accordingly, in the event of rising tensions in the Taiwan Strait, the U.S. must assure its allies that it has the situation "under control."⁵¹ This may involve putting pressure on Beijing, on Taipei, or on both.

48. Author's interview with Daniel Blumenthal.

49. Author's interview with Randall Schriver.

50. Kurt Campbell and Derek Mitchell, "Crisis in the Taiwan Strait?" *Foreign Affairs* 80:4 (July-August 2001), p. 14.

51. Author's interview with Richard Bush. More generally, see Michael McDevitt, "Taiwan: The Tail That Wags Dogs," *National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR) Analysis* 16:1 (October 2005), pp. 87-91.

The extent to which U.S. policy toward Taiwan could influence its strategic relationships in the region remains a matter of dispute within Washington, however. On one side of the issue are those who tend to stress the unique nature of the U.S. relationship with Taiwan. In this view, U.S. allies in Asia are unlikely to infer too much about Washington's reliability based on its Taiwan policy, recognizing that Taiwan is a special case. Others are much less certain the Taiwan issue will be seen as unique, in part because the situation raises the larger issue of American poise and resolve in the face of Chinese pressure.⁵²

In short, although there are varying views within the U.S. government on the credibility issue, Chinese observers who downplay this factor appear to be missing genuine concern on the part of at least some U.S. officials. These officials include individuals who have been deeply involved in Taiwan policy in the past, suggesting that this kind of concern is capable of influencing policy.

The Not So Nervous Hegemon

After downplaying Washington's interest in Taiwanese democracy and American concerns over credibility, most Chinese analysts conclude that the U.S. government is primarily interested in using Taiwan to counter China's rising power. As explained earlier, this perception naturally leads to the conclusion that the U.S. opposes unification—peaceful or otherwise—because it would merely lead to a stronger China. The accuracy of this perception is difficult to assess, particularly since U.S. officials would presumably not admit to harboring such unfriendly intentions. For three reasons, however, fear of a rising China seems unlikely to be the driving force behind U.S. Taiwan policy.

First, many of the justifications given to support the Nervous Hegemon view are open to question. It is not safe to assume that right-wing think tanks speak for the U.S. executive branch, even one led by a Republican president. Nor should one assume that what appears "rational" in Beijing will seem equally reasonable to policymakers in Washington. It was only a decade ago that many PRC-based analysts believed the U.S. deliberately sought formal Taiwanese independence, when in fact it did not. Lastly, while the Bush administration does hope to preserve American primacy, it also seeks to avoid military conflict with China insofar as possible. Accordingly, because a resolution of the Taiwan issue would remove the most potentially volatile irritant in Sino-U.S. relations, it is far from clear that the present U.S. government would see peaceful steps toward unification as contradicting American interests.

Second, none of the U.S. officials consulted for this study believe that this motivation has underpinned U.S. Taiwan policy in the past, though some thought it could in the future. Although this may not be surprising, the vehemence and

52. Author's interview with Randall Schriver.

consistency with which this perspective was rejected was telling; one former Clinton NSC official denounced this view as “dead wrong.”⁵³ Nor was there any evidence of partisan difference on this issue. One veteran of the Bush Pentagon argued that the Nervous Hegemon view was based on flawed notions of how policy is made in the U.S. government. Whereas this view assumes far-sighted realpolitik strategy, in reality “the U.S. does not think that far down the chessboard.”⁵⁴ This individual also noted that peaceful unification under current conditions seemed to him so unlikely that it was simply not an issue that the U.S. needed to worry about.

Of course, it is rare for a large national government to be completely of one mind on a given issue. In this case, it is well-known that before joining the Bush administration in 2001 as undersecretary of state, John Bolton, subsequently the U.N. ambassador until December 2006, openly advocated U.S. recognition of Taiwan. There is thus at least one individual who has served in the current administration who would likely oppose “peaceful unification” in any form under current conditions. However, Bolton’s views while he was in office had little impact on the Bush administration’s Taiwan policy, as evidenced by Bush’s direct criticism of Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian in December 2003. In fact, in his initial confirmation hearing, Bolton made clear that Taiwan would not be part of his portfolio while in government.⁵⁵

Perhaps more significantly, U.S. officials concerned about the alliance with Japan could take a somewhat different stance on the Taiwan issue in the future than those who are more involved in China policy. Specifically, Japan specialists might be more likely to take into account the concerns some Japanese politicians reportedly have about the geostrategic impact of unification, even if consensual, on Japan’s position in the region. The individuals consulted for this article, however, denied that such considerations had played any role in U.S. policy to date, or even that such matters had been discussed.⁵⁶

Third, U.S. behavior does not unambiguously support the Nervous Hegemon view. To be sure, the U.S. refuses to sell weapons to China, maintains restrictions on the trade of sensitive dual-use technologies, and lobbies other countries to do the same. U.S. economic policy, however, belies the notion that Washington is committed to keeping China as weak as possible. Chinese exports to the U.S. reached more than \$243 billion in 2005, trailing only those from Canada, while cumulative U.S. investment in the mainland surpassed \$50 billion that

53. Author’s interview with Robert Suettinger.

54. Author’s interview with Daniel Blumenthal.

55. See “U.S. Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC) Holds Hearing on the John Bolton Nomination,” *FDCH Political Transcripts*, March 29, 2001, <http://web.lexisnexis.com.ezp2.harvard.edu/universe/document?_m=5351e3ed567b95bbc3c01fb4f9f66fc4&_docnum=4&wchp=dGLbVlb-zSkVb&_md5=bc08c250af32439ad8efdb87b506fa53>.

56. Author’s interview with Randall Schriver.

year.⁵⁷ Although difficult to calculate precisely, the massive impact of this trade and investment on the overall financial and technical resources available to the PRC undoubtedly dwarfs the effect of U.S. trade restrictions. Washington has not merely acquiesced in this growing economic relationship but has actively encouraged it, most notably by supporting China's successful application for membership in the World Trade Organization. This support reflects a desire to promote U.S. economic interests rather than increase Chinese power, but it nonetheless contradicts the idea that Washington cannot tolerate a stronger China.

In addition, although the U.S. has not declared its support for peaceful unification, this need not imply that Washington opposes it. American officials stress that it is for Taipei and Beijing to work out the specific nature of their future relationship through dialogue; it is not for the U.S. to dictate the outcome of such negotiations in advance. Indeed, if the U.S. publicly announced support for peaceful unification, it would likely be interpreted in Beijing and Taipei as something more: support for the PRC's "one country, two systems" formula.⁵⁸ Because the U.S. has no interest in supporting that particular formula over any other mutually acceptable solution, such a statement seems inadvisable from Washington's point of view.

In sum, although it is difficult to document the motivations behind U.S. Taiwan policy definitively, it seems clear that Chinese perceptions are on the whole too pessimistic. Most observers are too quick to dismiss American interest in Taiwanese democracy and credibility concerns, motivations that need not conflict with Beijing's goal of unification. At the same time, the evidence that the U.S. hopes to prevent unification to counter the mainland's rising power is equivocal at best. Because this view has more worrisome implications for the future of Sino-American relations, its popularity in China is disquieting.

Skeptics might object that interviews with former U.S. officials are unreliable means of inferring the "real" intentions behind U.S. policy. In this view, American officials say one thing for public consumption but something else in private. Insofar as this hypothesis can be tested, it seems unfounded. Officials interviewed for this study noted that references to Taiwanese democracy can be found not merely in public pronouncements but in internal documents as well. Moreover, consultants with long experience working with U.S. government officials in intimate settings cannot recall a single instance in which an official referred to a goal of keeping Taiwan and the mainland divided.⁵⁹ If

57. For the export total, see U.S. Department of Commerce, *TradeStats Express*, <<http://tse.export.gov>>, accessed July 27, 2006. For the investment figure, see Wayne Morrison, *CRS Issue Brief for Congress: China's Economic Conditions*, July 12, 2006, p. 6, <<http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33534.pdf>>.

58. Personal communication from Richard Bush, May 8, 2006.

59. Michael Swaine, presentation, Institute of International Studies, Qinghua University, May 23, 2005.

there is a secret American plan to keep Taiwan and the mainland apart, it is so well-hidden that most U.S. officials involved in China policy do not know about it.

Conclusion

The results of this study may be troubling, but they should not be surprising. International politics is notoriously rife with misperceptions, and the U.S.-China relationship is particularly prone to misunderstanding. In this case, China's pessimistic perceptions have a number of disturbing implications. First, Chinese officials who believe the U.S. secretly opposes unification will be less sanguine about the prospects for peaceful unification with Taiwan, other things being equal. This expectation in turn makes it harder—if not impossible—to persuade Taipei to come to the negotiating table, while making coercion appear more necessary. Such a conclusion naturally increases support for investments in military hardware and training while undermining arguments for diplomatic initiatives and compromises. In addition, pessimism about the possibility of persuading Taiwan subverts arguments for democratization on the mainland, insofar as these arguments cite the boost that such reforms would give to cross-strait relations.

To be sure, the U.S. cannot dictate political outcomes on Taiwan. At the same time, China's influence over the island is rising as cross-strait economic ties continue to grow. It is thus possible that Chinese officials will see non-coercive approaches to Taiwan as increasingly viable in the future, even in the face of American resistance. Even so, Chinese perceptions of American opposition—no matter how impotent—to closer cross-strait ties are likely to foster skepticism about broader American intentions toward China, hindering cooperation on a variety of issues. Should China ultimately succeed in unifying with Taiwan peacefully, the U.S. has no interest in Chinese analysts believing that Beijing somehow “triumphed” over Washington's implicit resistance.

Given the stakes involved, it would be imprudent to allow China's overly pessimistic perceptions to persist. The key here is not merely assuring Beijing that the U.S. does not support Taiwanese independence, as both the Clinton and Bush administrations have done. This is an essential part of the task, to be sure, but it is not enough. Instead, American representatives must also stress that the U.S. is prepared to accept unification if it is reached peacefully and consensually.

Convincing Chinese interlocutors of U.S. sincerity on this score will not be easy. Yet, if Washington approaches this problem in the right way, there is at least some hope of progress. As other scholars have argued, diplomatic persuasion is most likely to succeed in settings that are relatively informal, particularly those that allow for small-group interaction and the development of

trust.⁶⁰ The U.S. should thus communicate its assurances through casual exchanges that recur over time, rather than via formal pronouncements that will likely be dismissed as diplomatic niceties. Indeed, the interviews for this study suggest that such casual interactions are extremely important. All of the Chinese observers with more sanguine views had either spent time in the U.S. or had considerable experience interacting with American interlocutors in less formal settings.⁶¹ In the future, the U.S. should work to expand such contacts, particularly with the relatively isolated Chinese military.

Nonetheless, before undertaking a comprehensive effort to reduce Chinese anxieties the U.S. government should develop a clearer view of its long-term goals on the Taiwan issue. Despite the consistency of views among the American officials interviewed for this study, the U.S. executive branch does not seem to have developed a coordinated position on this issue. In that sense, the Chinese pundit who argued that “the U.S. has a policy, but not a strategy, toward Taiwan” may well have been the most perceptive observer of all. A more intensive discussion of Taiwan within the U.S. thus is needed before greater efforts to reassure Beijing can be made. Although this is a long-term problem, deferring the matter merely allows dangerous misperceptions to fester.

60. Alastair Iain Johnston, “Treating International Institutions as Social Environments,” *International Studies Quarterly* 45:4 (December 2001), pp. 487–515.

61. Not all Chinese observers with experience in the U.S. held sanguine views, however. Instead, such experience seems to be a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the development of such views.