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Taiwan's Perspective of the U.S. Pivot to Asia Policy

By Dr. Edward I-hsin Chen

U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Rodham Clinton, claimed “the U.S. is back (to Asia)” in Bangkok on July 21, 2009.¹ However, it was not until November 2011 that President Barack Obama really returned to Asia with support for economic initiatives, democratic political values, diplomatic resolve, and military strength.

Most countries in the Asia-Pacific have been caught up in the sovereignty and energy disputes in the East China Sea and South China Sea, in the contest between China's soft power and the U.S.' "smart power," and in a subtle rivalry between the China-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the U.S.-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

This essay observes the U.S. pivot to Asia from Taiwan's perspective, exploring how the Republic of China (ROC) has benefited from the policy and what it will contribute to the Asian-Pacific region.

Taiwan's Value as a Strategic Partner Affirmed

As part of its pivot to Asia policy, the Obama administration sought to strengthen its relationships with its allies and to engage with new partners in the Asian-Pacific region. Consequently, Taiwan's value as a strategic partner in Asia has increased. In a speech at the East-West Center of Hawaii University on November 10, 2011, Hillary Clinton pointed out that while, “We will remain committed to the one-China policy and the preservation of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait,” she emphasized, “We have a strong relationship with Taiwan, an important security and economic partner, and we applaud the progress that we have seen in

¹ Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Remarks With Thai Deputy Prime Minister Korbsak Sabhavas, Secretary of State, Government House, Bangkok, Thailand, July 21, 2009.” Available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/july/126271.htm> (accessed July 24, 2009).

cross-Strait relations between China and Taiwan...and we look forward to continued improvement so there can be peaceful resolution of their differences.”²

American commitments to its allies and partners in the Asian-Pacific region are not easily broken. For example, if Washington was to abandon any of its allies and partners in the region, Asian-Pacific countries would be shocked, and the damage done to the perception of American power abroad would be significantly damaged. As a result, Taiwan’s fear of American abandonment has been reduced significantly since 2011 and its confidence in the American security umbrella has increased.

Taiwan as a Symbol of Democracy

Washington’s promotion of democracy, freedom, and human rights in the Asian-Pacific region has also benefited Taiwan’s position.

Political systems matter in international relations. The U.S. and Chinese political systems are mutually exclusive in nature.³ And it is the main reason why they will never evolve from two competitive powers into a pair of complex dependence states, despite more than ninety communication channels between them.

Taiwan sets a positive example of a stable democracy to China and other Asian countries. In contrast to China’s non-transparent one-party system, Taiwan is a beacon of democracy in the region. American strategic objectives lie in ensuring Taiwan remains a secure democratic state in the region, for losing the Taiwanese democratic symbol would be a major setback to American soft power strategy in the Asia-Pacific.

U.S. Arms Sales to Taiwan

China’s objective is to be in a position to settle sovereignty disputes on its own terms. To achieve this objective, China is increasing its military budget and developing capabilities to deter, delay, or deny possible U.S. support for Taiwan in the event of conflict. Today, not only does the balance of military power across the Strait tilt in favor of China, but China’s anti-access military capability is also growing more capable of denying the U.S. access to the region’s oceans in the event of a future conflict.⁴ China’s military rise has changed the balance of power cross-Straits, putting into jeopardy Taiwan’s ability to come to the political table with any leverage.

² “America’s Pacific Century,” a speech by Hillary Rodham Clinton, U.S. Secretary of State, at East-West Center, Honolulu, HI, November 10, 2011. Available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/11/176999.htm> (accessed November 13, 2011).

³ Ibid, Lieberthal and Wang 2012.

⁴ U.S. Defense Department, *Military and Security Development Involving the People’s Republic of China 2011*, Washington, DC: CreateSpace, 2011. Available at: http://www.defense.gov/pubs/2011_CMPR_Final.pdf (accessed May 1, 2011).

In light of this strategic imbalance, the Obama administration has significantly increased its arms sales to Taiwan since 2009, believing that doing so would not only help Taiwan to defend itself but also strengthen Taipei's confidence in the negotiating with Beijing. Although these arms sales are a far cry from equalizing the military imbalance, they have been a significant boon to Taiwan's security position and have caused China to more seriously weigh the costs of any invasion scenario.

Taiwan Is Relieved from China's Pressure for Political Talks

The U.S. pivot has eased pressure on Taiwan to engage China in political talks about reunification. Although cross-Strait relations have improved recently, most people in Taiwan prefer to maintain the status quo. Nonetheless, since the inking of Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) and related follow-up agreements, China has constantly promoted cross-Strait political talks.

In 2010, a number of China's actions were perceived by many as overly aggressive. In addition to designating Taiwan, Tibet, and its new territories (Xingjian) as parts of Beijing's "core interests," China flexed its muscle along its peripheral seas and adopted an assertive attitude in territorial disputes with its neighbors. China's assertiveness and its implicit/explicit claims of "core interests" over Taiwan, the Yellow Sea, the East Sea, and the South China Sea have contributed to the strategic distrust between the United States and China.⁵ China's actions were not ignored by the Obama administration, which responded by taking the initiative and stressing its pivot to Asia policy.⁶

Amidst this great power rivalry, it is prudent for Taiwan to maintain a balance between relying on U.S. security commitments on the one hand and China's economy and market on the other. In fact, this orientation is common practice among many of China's neighboring states, including Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, and Singapore.

Taiwan is in a difficult position, however. In the face of China's growing pressure for progress on cross-Strait political talks, Taipei cannot fully reject Beijing's overtures after taking so many benefits from China, but Taipei must also satisfy domestic mainstream public opinion which prefers the status quo. Fortunately, U.S. policy has helped to relieve Taipei from Beijing's pressure for political talks by: restating America's strong support for the peaceful resolution of the cross-Strait tensions; redirecting China's attention from Taiwan's political status to America's diplomatic, economic, military, and political presence in the Asia-Pacific region; pressuring

⁵ Lieberthal, Kenneth and Wang Jisi. *Addressing U.S.-China Strategic Distrust*. Washington, DC: John L. Thornton China Center at Brookings, Monograph Series, No. 4, March 2012.

⁶ Bader, Jeffrey A. *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2012), 69-82.

China on its domestic human rights record; affirming Taiwan's value as a strategic economic and security partner; and increasing Taiwan's negotiating position through arms sales.⁷

Taiwan Increases Its International Presence

U.S. policy has helped Taiwan to develop a model for increasing its international presence. So far, this model has significantly been applied in the Taiwan-Japan fishing agreement and will be put to the test in the recent Taiwan-Philippines conflict.

Following Japan's nationalization of the Diaoyutai islands in September 2012, Taiwan confronted Japan about its territorial claims. While Beijing called for Cross-Strait cooperation in tackling the Diaoyutai disputes with Japan, Washington kept a close eye on how Taipei would respond. After Taiwan rejected cross-Strait cooperation on the Japanese issue, the United States decided to exert pressure on Japan for Tokyo's concession on Taiwanese fishing rights. American support provided the critical breakthrough the Ma Ying-jeou administration had worked for during sixteen rounds of talks within the past seventeen years to achieve.

A similar incident occurred in May 2013 when a Taiwanese fishing captain was shot by a coast guard vessel of the Philippines. A verbal confrontation between Taipei and Manila soon escalated when Taiwan dispatched its coast guard and naval vessels to safeguard its fishing boats in the disputed waters. An investigation was conducted to determine responsibility for the tragedy. Following Taiwan's rejection of China's calls for Cross-Strait negotiations on this issue, the United States intervened and pressured the Philippines for Manila's apology and concessions for Taiwanese fishing rights in the controversial waters.

American support has allowed Taiwan to successfully promote its national interests, increase its international presence and publicity, and expand its fishing rights in both East China Sea and South China Sea.

Taiwan Deserves an Opportunity to Join the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)

Last but not least, the U.S. pivot policy provides Taipei a better chance of joining the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Immediately after his return from the Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in September of 2012, Lien Chan, former ROC Vice President and Special Envoy to APEC, disclosed that the Obama administration may welcome Taiwan to join the TPP.

The TPP is considered an important move toward the Free Trade Area of the Asian-Pacific (FTAAP).⁸ President Obama announced at the Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC)

⁷ Due in part to increased confidence from U.S. arms sales, the Kuomintang's Honorary Chairman, Wu Po-Hsiung, proposed the "One China Framework" when he met Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, in Beijing on June 14, 2013, launching the a new round of political talks across the Strait.

⁸ Remarks by the President to CEO Business Summit in Yokohama, Japan: Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, November 12, 2010. Available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/11/12/remarks-president-ceo-business-summit-yokohama-japan> (accessed November 15, 2010).

Summit that the United States will play a leading role in promoting the TPP in the Asian-Pacific region. His call for the establishment of the TPP in the region was echoed by Japan, Canada, and Mexico.⁹

President Ma responded by saying that Taiwan would join the U.S.-led Asian economic bloc within ten years while it completes preparations to reshuffle its domestic economic structure. When Raymond Burghardt, Chairman of the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT), paid a visit to Taipei on January 31, 2012, he linked the bilateral trade dispute to Taiwan's overall trade liberalization and its engagement with regional trade partners. He pointed out that, "Taiwan needs to have better relations with the Asia-Pacific region beyond China. Taiwan has said it has interests in joining the TPP in 10 years. Why wait 10 years? Why not make it sooner?"¹⁰

The more FTAs that Taiwan accumulates, the more likely it will gain support from the United States to join the TPP. For example, Taiwan is very close to inking a free trade agreement with Singapore and New Zealand, improving its chances to become a TPP signatory. As an important security and economic partner of the United States, Taiwan deserves an opportunity to join the TPP.

Conclusion

The Republic of China on Taiwan has benefited greatly from the U.S. pivot to Asia. As a result of increased U.S. activity in the region, Taiwan was relieved from China's political pressures, was affirmed as a partner, was supported as a strategic democracy, received arms sales from the U.S., expanded its international space, and improved its chances of joining the TPP.

Taiwan will in turn contribute to the peace, prosperity, and stability in the Asian-Pacific region by further improving its relations with the states in the region, and China and the United States in particular.

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⁹ Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Kan of Japan in Statements to the Press in Yokohama, Japan: Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, November 13, 2010. Available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/11/13/remarks-president-obama-and-prime-minister-kan-japan-statements-press-yo> (accessed November 16, 2010).

¹⁰ Shih Hsiu-chuan, "AIT Chairman Links Beef to Trade Talks and TPP Accession," *Taipei Times* (Taipei), February 1, 2012, <http://www.taipetimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2012/02/01/2003524404>; "MOEA Trying to Resolve US Beef Row," *The China Post* (Taipei), February 1, 2012, <http://www.Chinapost.com.tw/taiwan/foreign-affairs/2012/02/01/330283/MOEA-trying.htm>. Burghardt added that "there are a lot of things Taiwan would have to do with its agriculture policy, its policy in the pharmaceutical and financial sectors. All of these things have to be liberalized."