

## **Taiwan at the Crossroads of Its Destiny**

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You may not like it, but for centuries Taiwan's destiny has never been decided by its popular will, but in turn by neighboring great powers such as China, Japan, and the United States. The recent 20 to 30 years, practically the only beautiful exception allowing Taiwan to self-govern, is the result of reconciliation between China and the United States. Now China is rising and prepared to barge out into the world, and the U.S. is suddenly awoken to this harsh reality and eager to push it back. Hence the return of cruel geopolitics to Taiwan.

These new circumstances seem to lend greater confidence to President Tsai Ing-wen in her pursuit of "Two States," and greater sense of security to her Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) supporters. However, is Taiwan really safer now than before? Has the "sense of national doom" disappeared simply because the term is not mentioned anymore?

History has repeatedly shown that the greatest danger in the great-power rivalry usually lies at the initial stage. The competitors tend to push outward strenuously without knowing where the real limit is. An equilibrium will be reached only after quite a few trials and conflicts. In the case of the U.S.-Soviet rivalry, for instance, it wasn't until the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, after the Korean War, Taiwan Strait crises, Berlin crises, Suez Canal crisis, etc. that it became clear there would not be a hot war between superpowers, only a cold war. What followed was nothing more than proxy wars or punitive actions against some unfortunate small countries.

The trial period between China and the U.S. has already begun. Trade war and tech war were already introduced. Waiting in the wings are perhaps the financial war, or conflicts associated with the South China

Sea, Diaoyutai Islands, and the Korean Peninsula. Nevertheless, the most dangerous, difficult, and sensitive issue among all is undoubtedly the island of Taiwan. Therefore, the two great powers have managed this issue with utmost caution. For instance, Beijing did not immediately shut its doors upon the inauguration of President Tsai; and Washington only said a few nice words and passed a few itchy but not hurtful bills, but not daring to take grand actions.

However, Tsai's re-election in January changed everything. For it represents not only a specific "dot" in time, as if everything would remain the same after the "dot" as in the past. In the eyes of Mainland China, Tsai's re-election may well mean a "line"— i.e. a trend, thus a heightened sense of urgency. It may also be seen against the background of a "chessboard" entangling many other dots and lines in China's internal and external affairs. As such, the value of Taiwan moved up, so did the military and financial costs China was willing to pay.

As the U.S. and China begin contesting for "lines" and "chessboards," Taiwan's destiny is slipping out of its control and entering the arena of power struggle between them. Beijing's role in particular is most crucial since Taiwan has been a core concern for the entire country and people; whereas, for the United States, Taiwan ranks second to Japan or even South Korea.

This is why I put forward the thesis of "five Ifs" before the presidential election. Now four out of five Ifs are no longer Ifs. The results of the HK and Taiwan elections are now known. That the DPP is starting a "new dynasty" in Taiwan, perhaps sliding to a "new country" in the near future is now known. That the U.S. played a significant role therein is also well known. The only unknown is the degree to which Xi Jinping is under pressure on Taiwan domestically.

One can be certain that strategists in both the U.S. and China are now eagerly assessing their assets, tools, and potential costs in their pursuit of primacy. Even though the comprehensive national strength of the U.S. is still greater than that of China, the picture does not look too good for

Taiwan. Two points can be made here. First, the United States is “willing but unable”, both internally and externally, to help Taiwan. In sharp contrast to Beijing’s collective thinking, concentrated power, and strong will on Taiwan, President Donald Trump has been busy deepening internal cleavages and splitting the American society along partisan, racial and class lines. As a result, although hostility towards China enjoys a rare consensus in Washington, it has yet to be forged into an actionable strategy.

Internationally, Trump’s “America First” alienated just about every ally in the world. Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany openly said that Europe can no longer rely on the US protection and “must take destiny into its own hands.” South Korea is now visibly drifting away and the Philippines are considering ending the visits of US forces.

Second, in terms of military, America’s “arm cannot stretch that far” for Taiwan. Even though the U.S. still commands the most powerful armed forces on earth, its strength and attention are inevitably divided among multiple areas in need. With Taiwan being on the other end of the Pacific, available U.S. forces may not be able to rival China at crucial moments. The U.S. carrier groups may have enormous warfighting experiences, but only as the “world policeman,” striking the villains with near impunity, never to have fought a “worthy peer” when the villain may strike back. Unfortunately China’s missiles can now penetrate through U.S. defenses and hit the U.S. carriers within the entire maritime region west of Guam with speed and precision. The Pentagon thus found itself losing all of the eighteen wargames in recent years.

Recently fighter jets from the Mainland have run through the median line of the Taiwan Strait multiple times, once even pressing 80 kilometers east of the median line and stayed for 12 minutes. Each time the US aircraft showed up only the following day at their earliest. Why? The U.S. has only one air base within the unrefueled fighter range of 800 kilometers from the island whereas China has nearly 40 air bases. Besides, as much as they like, it is impossible for the American carriers to stand on guard near Taiwan for any long time.

So everything hinges on Xi Jinping's determination regarding Taiwan, and this backtracks to his pressure from within China, as mentioned earlier. Compared to the Russian President Vladimir Putin, Xi's outward actions have been relatively restrained. Putin swallowed Crimea and moved into eastern Ukraine soon after he felt the NATO pressure on Ukraine. He even joined the civil war in Syria to vie for influence in the Middle East. Nevertheless, since the unfolding of the US-China competition, Washington has been "all punches and kicks" with the trade war, tech war, Hong-Kong, and Taiwan. From dots to line, line to chessboard, Beijing has been rather passive in its reaction to the U.S., not taking new initiatives. Now as the sensitive Taiwan issue is bubbling, Xi's patience is presumably facing an unprecedented test intensified by the spread of the novel coronavirus as well as escalating hostility between the peoples on both sides of the Taiwan Strait.

It is hoped that Taiwan's leaders are cautious enough not to place a proverbial "last straw" at this time.

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