

Leif-Eric Easley, "Lessons of Lost U.S.-Taiwan Trust and the Need to Stabilize Taiwan Identity," *JoongAng Daily* (with *International Herald Tribune*), February 4, 2008, page 11; *IHT-Asahi Shimbun*, February 11, 2008, page 23; *China Post*, February 16, 2008, page 4; *OMNI*, February 18, 2008, page 1.

After the Kuomintang (KMT) rout of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in Taiwan's legislative elections in January, international observers are asking how Taiwan may soon reorient its foreign policy. Both candidates for Taiwan's March 22 presidential contest have pledged to rebuild trust with the United States.

Trust between Taipei and Washington is of vital importance, first because Taiwan's security and responsible diplomacy hinge on avoiding the perception of abandonment by the United States. Second, mutual trust is essential to the U.S. stabilizing role in cross-strait relations because Washington needs assurance that Taipei will not entrap it in an unnecessary conflict with China. Third, any lack of trust between Taiwan and the U.S. injects unwelcome uncertainty into both sides' relations with Beijing.

In the early days of President George W. Bush's administration, U.S. support for Taiwan was approaching a level not seen in decades. Today, mutual confidence in the relationship is reminiscent of 1970s lows. So before laying out an agenda for improving U.S.-Taiwan trust, it is useful to examine the reasons why trust was damaged during Chen Shui-bian's tenure.

First, there were perceptions of betrayal on both sides. President Chen articulated in his 2000 inaugural address "four noes" regarding Taiwan's international status. U.S. officials considered Chen's subsequent statements on Taiwan independence and the constitution, initiatives to use "Taiwan" instead of "Republic of China," discontinuation of the National Unification Council, and pursuit of referendum politics as going back on his word. International friends of Taiwan resented Chen's public use of their support and cooperation to score partisan points. Chen's identity politics to garner votes domestically came at the expense of trust internationally.

Meanwhile, some in Taiwan felt that Washington abandoned Taiwan's democracy for profitable relations with China and post-September 11 security priorities. They allege that Washington takes cues from Beijing on how to deal with Taiwan. Some groups in Taiwan express the sentiment that the island is so strategically important, America must protect it, and that Taiwan "standing up to China" is what Washington really wants. They feel betrayed when U.S. officials make clear the position of "no unilateral change to the status quo" and criticize Taiwan policies.

Second, there was lack of consultation and mutual respect. U.S.-Taiwan trust needs open and stable communication between executive and legislative branches. Unfortunately,

Washington places prohibitive restrictions on official contacts. What is more, the Chen administration fell short in staffing Taiwan's foreign policy apparatus. Many policy experts remained loyal to the KMT camp while Chen's DPP lacked human resources and did not sufficiently reach across the aisle. Chen often shuffled appointed positions for political reasons; with such turnover, it proved difficult to develop coherent policy and build personal trust with officials of other governments.

Chen's administration also presented surprises – such as "one country each side" and discontinuing the Unification Council – without meaningful consultation with Washington. Unpredictability damages trust, as does diplomatic scolding. The Bush administration felt compelled to admonish Taiwan publicly, especially regarding the UN referendum. While the referendum is unlikely to pass, it caused unfortunate perceptions of Washington not adequately respecting Taiwan's democracy and Taiwan not adequately respecting U.S. interests.

Third, Taiwan politics were fiercely contested, causing defense policy to become overly politicized. Taiwan's young democracy is not institutionally consolidated and remains handicapped by lack of international recognition and susceptibility to united front tactics by Beijing. Chen's domestic credibility has been dangerously low since the terms of his re-election in 2004 and charges of corruption and mismanagement. The long-ruling KMT had no experience of how to act as a faithful opposition. Defense policy, particularly arms purchases approved by Washington, became a political football. By not funding the arms package, Taiwan appeared to be spurning cooperation with the U.S. and not taking responsibility for self-defense.

Fourth, the strategic visions of Taiwan and the United States began to diverge. Both Washington and Taipei realize that cross-Strait relations are an important test of China's "peaceful rise" and becoming a "responsible stakeholder." U.S. policymakers believe this test is in progress and want to see China succeed to everyone's benefit. In contrast, the current leadership in Taipei appears convinced China will fail the test, making consolidation of Taiwan's independence an urgent priority. A preponderance of shared interests and values suggest that Taiwan and U.S. strategic visions will re-converge, but not without due effort.

Future combinations of policymakers in Taipei and Washington will take lessons from these trials. Even then, restoring mutual trust will not be easy. America's attention will continue to be absorbed elsewhere. Meanwhile, as China's power and international interdependence have grown, so too has the weight of its preferences in the diplomatic calculations of other countries. Taipei is frustrated not only by this political disadvantage, but also by how Beijing's heightened confidence has allowed it to show restraint and employ soft power. As a result, political precondition and missile-wielding China has appeared reasonable, while defense-oriented democratic Taiwan is seen as recklessly indulging in identity politics.

The greatest challenge for the next Taiwan president will be stabilizing Taiwanese identity. Key for restoring U.S.-Taiwan trust and improving Taiwan's standing will be the new government's ability to build domestic consensus on an international strategy. Such a strategic vision would prioritize interests (economic competitiveness, secure autonomy) over desires (international reputation, formal independence).

Political parties need to offer different ideas for the future rather than different versions of the past. Policy debates should be informed by facts about results rather than accusations of insufficient love of Taiwan. Taiwan identity needs to increasingly focus on what is good about Taiwan rather than what is bad about China, and what Taiwan contributes to the world rather than what the world owes Taiwan.

Taiwan's identity will never be static or uniform; identities are naturally dynamic and contested. What is needed is wise leadership to restore trust in government and chart a trajectory endorsed by an inclusive majority of the Taiwan people. The upcoming presidential election can be a vehicle for stabilizing Taiwan identity, and thus a significant step in improving trust with the United States.

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