

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

Protecting Taiwan’s Democracy from China with US Support

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Taiwan is a thriving democracy in Asia. Since its peaceful transition from authoritarian rule to representative democracy in the late 1980s, Taiwan has been a textbook country case for the global “third wave” of democratization.¹ During the historically unprecedented COVID-19 global pandemic, Taiwan even overtook Japan and South Korea as the most democratic country in Asia according to the 2020 Democracy Index of the Economist Intelligence Unit.²

Taiwan’s Democracy and its Domestic Discontents

Despite Taiwan’s political progress, however, a large proportion of the population remains discontent with the country’s democracy. The Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) has conducted several surveys measuring public attitudes towards democratic consolidation over the past two decades. The latest survey, administered between July 2018 and January 2019, provides a quick snapshot of such discontent.

Table 1: Domestic discontent with Taiwan’s democracy	
Item	%
<i>Democracy makes the national economy perform poorly.</i>	49
<i>Democracy is indecisive and unable to solve problems.</i>	49
<i>Democracy cannot maintain order and stability effectively.</i>	42
<i>Democracy has prerequisites that people in this country do not meet.</i>	39
<i>Democracy or not, the government must solve economic problems in this country.</i>	33
<i>Democracy has a negative influence on social and ethical values in this country.</i>	31
Note: Calculated by the author from raw data of the fifth wave of the Asian Barometer Survey	

Table 1 lists the results from ABS. First, close to fifty percent were unsatisfied with democracy’s economic performance and problem-solving decisiveness. Moreover, near forty percent believed

¹ Larry Dimond, Marc Plattner, Yun-han Chu, and Hung-mao Tien eds, *Consolidating the Third Wave Democracies: Regional Challenges* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

² Grace Li, “Taiwan leapfrogs Japan and South Korea to top Asia democracy table.” Nikkei Asia, 4 February 2021. Available at <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Taiwan-leapfrogs-Japan-and-South-Korea-to-top-Asia-democracy-table>. Accessed 28 August 2021.

that people in the country did not meet the prerequisites for democracy and that democracy could not maintain order and stability effectively. Finally, around thirty percent of Taiwanese respondents thought that democracy had a negative influence on social and ethical values in the country and that the priority of the government should be the economy rather than democracy.

Perceived Chinese Influence and Discontent

Who constituted this potential coalition of democratic backsliding in Taiwan? While the social sciences offer many plausible explanations for democratic backsliding constituencies, this briefing focuses on the perceived influence of China on Taiwan.

Question: How much influence does China have on our country [Taiwan]?	%
<i>Some or a great deal of influence</i>	91
<i>Otherwise</i>	9
Total	100

Note: Calculated by the author from raw data of the fifth wave of the Asian Barometer Survey

The influence of China on Taiwan has been widely recognized by Taiwanese citizens. As shown in **Table 2**, nearly nine out of ten thought China had some or a great deal of influence on Taiwan. This is close to a political consensus among the electorate. The implication of this result for Taiwan's democracy becomes a crucial question.

Such widespread perceived influence of China on Taiwan seemed to fuel domestic discontent with Taiwan's democracy. As **Table 3** shows, a simple Chi-Square test of the association between the perceived influence of China on Taiwan and the intensity of discontent with Taiwan's democracy—measured by the number of items each respondent agreed with—rejected the null hypothesis that the two are unrelated (chi-square with six degrees of freedom = 52.2851, $p = 0.000$).

Intensity of discontent	Perceived influence of China on Taiwan		Total
	Some or a great deal	Otherwise	
<i>0</i>	<i>237</i>	<i>55</i>	292
<i>1</i>	<i>190</i>	<i>12</i>	202
<i>2</i>	<i>175</i>	<i>7</i>	182
<i>3</i>	<i>155</i>	<i>13</i>	168
<i>4</i>	<i>168</i>	<i>10</i>	178
<i>5</i>	<i>134</i>	<i>9</i>	143
<i>6</i>	<i>91</i>	<i>3</i>	94
Total	1150	109	1259
Pearson Chi2 (6)	52.2851	P	0.000

Note: Calculated by the author from raw data of the fifth wave of the Asian Barometer Survey

The simple ordinary least squares (OLS) regression of the intensity of discontent with Taiwan's democracy on the perception of China's on Taiwan arrived at a similar conclusion. As **Table 4** shows, all else equal, those who thought China had some or a great deal of influence on Taiwan were more discontented with Taiwan's democracy by one additional unit than otherwise.

Table 4: The OLS regression analysis	
	<i>Intensity of discontent</i>
<i>Perception of China's influence on Taiwan</i>	0.974 ^{***} (0.194)
Constant	1.541 ^{***} (0.185)
<i>N</i>	1259
<i>R</i> ²	0.020
Note: Calculated by the author from raw data of the fifth wave of the Asian Barometer Survey. Standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.	

Taken together, regardless of the method of empirical analysis, perception of China's influence on Taiwan was positively correlated with the intensity of domestic discontent with Taiwan's democracy. These empirical results, though preliminary, suggest that the perceived influence of China on Taiwan is likely to undermine Taiwan's democracy by provoking domestic discontent, forming a constituency for democratic backsliding. Very importantly, this implies that China's influence could pose a threat to Taiwan's democracy *even if Beijing does not intend to do so*.

This is where this issue briefing differs from most contemporary policy analyses of (or even debates on) Taiwan's democracy and its relations with China: the intention of Beijing, whether to unify Taiwan peacefully or violently, is *not* required for China to be a threat to Taiwan's democracy.³ Such a threat could simply be an unintended political consequence of China's reemergence as a great power that does not practice democracy. As the so-called "socialism with Chinese characteristics" for national development has been increasingly attractive to *some* Taiwanese, they have become less supportive of Taiwan's democracy no matter the circumstance. It can be said that these people form the basis of the democratic backsliding constituency.

Protecting Taiwan's Democracy from China

The United States plays an important role in protecting Taiwan's democracy from China and its influence. On August 11, 2021, the White House announced its plan to convene a virtual Summit for Democracy in early December, to be followed by a second, in-person summit in roughly a year's time, for consultation, cooperation, and joint action to "strengthen the foundation for democratic renewal."⁴ While the list of invitees has not been released, Secretary of State Antony Blinken confirmed that Taiwan will be invited when attending a hearing of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs on March 10.⁵

As usual, Beijing opposed Washington's idea of inviting Taiwan, and in particular President Tsai Ing-wen, to participate in the summit. On August 12, the Chinese state media outlet, *Global Times*, even publicly threatened to bring about "unprecedented storms in the Taiwan Strait" if "the

³ See, for instance, Michael Beckley, "The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia: How China's Neighbors Can Check Chinese Naval Expansion," *International Security*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (2017), pp. 78–119. Travis Sharp, John Meyers, Michael Beckley, "Correspondence: Will East Asia Balance against Beijing?" *International Security*, Vol. 43, No. 3, pp. 194–197.

⁴ White House. *President Biden to Convene Leaders' Summit for Democracy*. 11 August 2021. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/08/11/president-biden-to-convene-leaders-summit-for-democracy/>. Accessed 31 August 2021.

⁵ Kelvin Chen, "US secretary of state to invite Taiwan to democracy summit." *Taiwan News* 11 March 2021. Available at: <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/4147760>. Accessed 31 August 2021.

US and Taiwan break the bottom line” with Tsai’s presence at the summit.⁶ Accordingly, whether to invite President Tsai Ing-wen to participate in the Summit for Democracy is a test of the Biden administration’s commitment to the preservation of Taiwan’s democracy. Only when the Biden administration is willing to put US credibility on the line will citizens in Taiwan be confident that the Chinese influence on Taiwan can be unambiguously checked, thereby placating domestic discontent with Taiwan’s democracy. Doing so will also allow the Biden administration to send a credible signal of how deeply it believes in democracy to strengthen the solidarity of the global democratic alliance. In contrast, if the Biden administration backs down, the perceived influence of China on Taiwan will continue to reinforce pre-existing domestic discontent with democracy and enlarge the democratic backsliding constituency in Taiwan. In turn, the rest of the world will become skeptical of the administration’s commitments to “defending against authoritarianism, fighting corruption, and promoting respect for human rights” which are the centerpiece of the summit.

The Dilemma of Democracy Preservation in Taiwan

The above-mentioned example perfectly illustrates a fundamental question for the entangled US-China-Taiwan triangular relations: *How much* is the US willing to pay to protect Taiwan’s democracy from China and to uphold the solidarity of a global alliance of “like-minded” democracies? Although no answer to this question is definitive unless President Biden shows his hand, some analytical speculations and suggestions can still be made.

From a theoretical perspective of strategic choice, it is in the strategic interest of the Biden administration to keep the price it is prepared to pay to preserve Taiwan’s democracy under its hat. Making such a price public could embolden Beijing and Taipei to engage in provocative actions against each other. As a result, committing to democracy preservation would risk the administration being dragged into unwanted diplomatic controversies or even military conflict. This is exactly what most observers had witnessed in the increasingly unstable triangular relations throughout the Trump years. By contrast, while keeping the reservation price private information can make such political risks more manageable, doing so also makes global democratic solidarity nearly impossible in the long term due to the daunting collective action challenge. In other words, the Biden administration is faced with a *dilemma of democracy preservation* in Taiwan.

The US Supremacy over China for Taiwan’s Democracy

One direct solution is to *maintain the supremacy of the US*, both diplomatically and militarily. This suggests that the Biden administration must make its foreign policy of democracy preservation attractive to the international community so other countries would stand up for the US leadership.⁷ Convening a summit to listen to what partners want from the US in terms of democracy preservation is a good start. In addition, the administration must also increase its capabilities, especially in areas of emerging dual-use technologies such as artificial intelligence. This will help

⁶ Editorial, “US, Taiwan crossing the red line will create historical opportunity for PLA fighter jets to fly over the island.” Global Times 12 August 2021. Available at: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202108/1231317.shtml>. Accessed 31 August 2021.

⁷ David Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

the US credibly deter Beijing from waging or threatening to wage a war in the Taiwan Strait when a crisis escalates. As long as the US is sufficiently authoritative and powerful *relative to* China and can afford potential costs of any unwanted diplomatic controversies or even military conflicts with China, the political risks of committing to democracy preservation can be significantly lowered.

A widely discussed alternative strategy is to cut back on the US commitment to Taiwan, as suggested by some prominent US-based realist scholars of international relations. In 2014, the University of Chicago professor John Mearsheimer wrote, “while the United States has good reasons to want Taiwan as part of the balancing coalition it will build against China, there are also reasons to think this relationship is not sustainable over the long term.”⁸ Likewise, the George Washington University professor Charles Glaser advocated “retrenchment” in a recent piece in *Foreign Affairs*, suggesting the Biden administration “could end its commitment to Taiwan and scale back its opposition to China’s assertive policies simply to avoid conflict.”⁹

However, this line of thought is flawed. The US commitment to Taiwan is not only for the sake of security but also for democracy preservation. The self-image of the US as a democracy preserver, or even a more active role of democracy promotor under a liberal international order, is an indispensable part of such a commitment. Currently, there is a clear bipartisan consensus on upholding this self-image in US domestic politics. Rebuilding a global democratic alliance led by the US remains as the Biden administration’s foreign policy. Furthermore, Congress has pushed the administration to do even more by legislating new Taiwan-related bills beyond the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979.

In terms of public opinion, a majority of Americans also seem to support the US commitment to Taiwan on multiple fronts. As the latest public opinion survey data from the 2021 Chicago Council on Global Affairs show, 69% of Americans favored US recognition of Taiwan as an independent country, 65% supported the US inclusion of Taiwan in international organizations, 57% supported the signing of a US-Taiwan free trade agreement, 53% supported a formal US-Taiwan alliance, and 46% favored explicitly committing to defend Taiwan if China invades.¹⁰ Likewise, according to the 2021 Pew Research poll, Republican party supporters are more supportive of curtailing China’s influence than Democratic party supporters. This provides a favorable political condition for the Biden administration to pursue a bipartisan policy to support Taiwan.¹¹

Taken together, strengthening US commitment to Taiwan is the right path for the US to secure Taiwan in terms of security and democracy. Fortunately, key players such as the Biden administration, Congress, and the American electorate currently show a willingness to support Taiwan’s democracy.

⁸ John J. Mearsheimer, “Say Goodbye to Taiwan,” *The National Interest*, 25 February 2014. Available at <https://nationalinterest.org/article/say-goodbye-taiwan-9931>. Accessed 31 August 2021.

⁹ Charles Glaser, “Washington is avoiding the tough question on Taiwan and China: The Case for Reconsidering US Commitments in East Asia,” *Foreign Affairs* 28 April 2021. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2021-04-28/washington-avoiding-tough-questions-taiwan-and-china>. Accessed 31 August 2021.

¹⁰ Dina Smeltz and Craig Kafura, “For the First Time, Half of Americans Favor Defending Taiwan if China Invades,” *The Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, 26 August 2021. Available at: <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/research/public-opinion-survey/first-time-half-americans-favor-defending-taiwan-if-china-invades>. Accessed 31 August 2021.

¹¹ Laura Silver, Kat Devin and Christine Huang, “Most Americans Support Tough Stance Toward China on Human Rights, Economic Issues,” *Pew Research Center*, 4 March 2021. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/03/04/most-americans-support-tough-stance-toward-china-on-human-rights-economic-issues/>. Accessed 10 September 2021.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the influence of China on Taiwan presents a threat to Taiwan's democracy. This is because the perceived influence of China on Taiwan itself may generate discontent with democracy in Taiwan even if this was not Beijing's intent. To protect Taiwan's democracy, the US is faced with a dilemma on whether or not to take meaningful actions to check the influence of China on Taiwan, thereby placating potential democratic backsliding constituencies at the expense of unwanted diplomatic controversies or even military conflict with China. While some prominent US-based realist scholars of international relations continue to suggest cutting back US commitment to Taiwan as a permanent solution to the dilemma, in the current context of US domestic politics, maintaining supremacy over China seems more realistic than the retrenchment alternative. ■

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