

Biden or Trump? US policy on Taiwan will be determined - once again - by the national interest

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With the inauguration of Joe Biden as the 46th president of the United States in January 2021, much has already been said and written about possible drastic changes in US policy toward Taiwan. There is understandable apprehension in Taipei about what a Biden presidency could mean for Taiwan's relationship with the United States.

There are several reasons for Taiwan to be concerned with Biden's new administration. One reason is that there was little in Biden's campaign rhetoric to suggest that the former vice-president would work to protect the island's security and democracy. Biden's recent record on cross-strait engagement remains closely associated with the more conciliatory approach toward China adopted by the Obama administration. Taiwanese democratic activists are quick to point to Washington's muted response to the 2014 Umbrella protests in Hong Kong as evidence that the Obama-Biden team ignored warnings about Beijing's tightening control over the former British colony.

Another reason is that it seems that President Biden will not be as supportive of Taiwan, and as willing to confront China, as his unorthodox predecessor. It is an open secret that Taiwan is one of the few hotbeds of support anywhere in the world for Donald Trump. During the past four years, US-Taiwan relations have strengthened in virtually every respect, from diplomatic gestures to the always sensitive domain of security cooperation. Many Taiwanese have dubbed Trump as the most pro-Taiwan president in US history. On December 19, a crowd of Trump fans did not hesitate to gather in the center of Taipei to show their support for the current US president. While the rally failed to attract a large turnout, it reflected a touch of nostalgia, that goes beyond just Trump supporters, for an era in which Taiwan's relationship with the US was as close to nation-to-nation as possible.

Joe Biden and Donald Trump could certainly not be more different, but when it comes to Taiwan policy, the preservation of national interest will remain the priority of the next US president.

More than seven decades ago, Washington supported Chiang Kai-shek because he was anti-communist, not because he was a democrat. When the Korean War broke out, the US decided to intervene militarily to prevent a Communist Chinese takeover of the island. This led to the signing of the US-ROC Mutual Defense Treaty in late 1954, which not only assured the security and continuity of Chiang's regime in Taiwan, but also enabled the US to complete a network of military alliances containing Communist expansion in the Asia-Pacific. Flash forward two decades and President Richard Nixon was arguing that the US must come to grips with the reality of China. In Washington's view, the normalization of relations with Beijing was a calculated move designed to drive a deeper wedge between China and the Soviet Union. It was in the US interest to use closer diplomatic relations with Beijing as leverage in dealing with Moscow, especially on the issue of Vietnam. To Nixon, and his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, the overarching geopolitical importance of developing a relationship with China justified the removal of any and all intervening obstacles. Neither Nixon nor Kissinger seriously worried about the fate of Taiwan or the will of the people on the island: the stakes were simply too high.

Now, at the dawn of a Biden era, what is the national interest of the United States when it comes to China? Biden will face a resurgent opponent who has been growing increasingly authoritarian at home and assertive abroad. Beijing's drive for primacy in the political, economic, technological, and, ultimately, military realms will require an offensive response from the new administration. While Joe Biden is likely to embrace opportunities for collaboration with China on globally urgent issues like trade, pandemics and climate change, he will have to display a clear and bold stance against Chinese attempts at upending the current US-led liberal international order. Indeed, Beijing is not aiming at just participating in global affairs anymore, but is unambiguously seeking to rewrite the whole structure and rules of the system to its own benefit.



In this context, Biden will have very little choice but to maintain Trump's commitment to counter China and to stand up to the aspiration of the latter to overtake the US as the world's dominant power. Joe Biden's future policy on China is expected to take the form of a coalition-building effort in support of this containment strategy. It is only by strengthening its alliances with Asian democracies that Washington will be able to preserve its influence and retain its leadership on the continent. As a close partner of the US, this should be encouraging news for Taiwan. While the Biden foreign policy team might be less vocal than its predecessor when engaging with the island, it fully understands the substantive value of Taiwan, as well as the risks that its reunification with China would mean for the US.

For better or worse, Taiwan's destiny is intertwined with the interests of its powerful benefactor. Fortunately for Taipei, it seems that for the time being, the interests of Taiwan and the US are more aligned than ever. Therefore, the government of Tsai Ing-wen should continue to work closely with the US, which is a policy that has a broad support across the partisan spectrum in Taiwan. While it is important for Taipei to readjust its pace with the new Biden administration in power, it should remind Washington that Taiwan is an asset to be valued and not a card to be played in the US relationship with China. As a post-pandemic world emerges, the United States has much to gain by deepening its ties with Taiwan, a leading democracy and a technology powerhouse.

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