



## Candidates Should Start Thinking About Taiwan

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During a presidential election campaign, candidates tend to dumb down the issues, delivering sound bites instead of nuanced policy prescriptions. That's bad enough, but it's even worse when candidates completely ignore looming challenges.

Such has been the case with Taiwan. Despite the fact that Taiwan is a major flashpoint for U.S.-China relations and the situation there is getting tense, Taiwan has been mentioned only once so far in the nineteen Republican and Democratic primary debates.

Politically speaking, the lack of discussion on Taiwan is understandable. Although in the long run China's rise presents the most critical challenge to U.S. national interests, today terrorism and ISIS loom much larger in the minds of most Americans.

But with China flexing its muscles in the South China Sea and renewed uncertainty about the future of its relationship with Taiwan, the next president of the United States won't have the luxury of ignoring China. Taiwan may not be the primary foreign policy issue of the campaign, but generating more debate about how the United States should respond to China/Taiwan issues is imperative for U.S. national security in the long run.

Economic turmoil in mainland China and political changes in Taiwan are contributing to a very uncertain environment in the Taiwan Strait. The last eight years of economic rapprochement, championed by Taiwan's outgoing president Ma Ying-jeou, reduced tensions with Mainland China. However, popular opposition to the speed and depth of his policies helped bring the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which strongly supported formal independence from China in the past, into power in the January 2016 elections. During the last DPP administration (2000-08) the Taiwan-China relationship was antagonistic. In China, a slowing economy has already caused turmoil in the stock market and announcements of big layoffs in state-owned enterprises. It is unclear how the economic slowdown will impact China's Taiwan policy, but economic troubles combined with growing ideological tension within Chinese society makes for an unpredictable future.

Antagonism could return to the Taiwan-China relationship if Taiwan's president-elect, Tsai Ing-wen, does not commit to the 1992 Consensus. This agreement affirmed both Taiwan's and

China's commitment to the "one China" concept, and was the foundation of Taiwan's cooperative approach to cross-strait relations for the past eight years.

During her presidential campaign and since winning the election, Tsai has repeatedly stated a desire to maintain stability in cross-strait relations, but she has not explicitly referenced the 1992 Consensus. This does not sit well with Chinese officials. During this year's National People's Congress, Chinese President Xi Jinping clearly stated the importance of the 1992 Consensus to good relations. Other officials responsible for relations with Taiwan have echoed this sentiment. If Tsai does not accept the consensus, maintaining the status quo in cross-strait relations will likely be very difficult.

A hostile Taiwan-China relationship would be impossible for the U.S. to ignore. For starters, China could easily restrict cross-strait tourism or increase diplomatic pressure against the handful of countries that have full diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Should tensions escalate to military posturing or exercises, as happened during the 1995-96 Taiwan Strait Crisis, regional allies such as Japan would pressure the U.S. president to help stabilize the situation, especially given concerns over China's recent, more aggressive activities in the South China Sea.

Though actual military conflict is unlikely, in the event that tensions spiral out of control the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act requires the President and Congress to determine "appropriate action" to aid Taiwan, which could include military intervention. Americans might be surprised to learn that both the United States and China have war-gamed this battle for decades, and armed conflict in the Taiwan Strait is consistently listed as a top concern in the annual DoD report to Congress on China's military.

Pentagon planners worry that a confrontation in the Taiwan Strait could draw the United States and China into direct armed conflict. However unlikely, this is a scenario that the next president of the United States cannot afford to ignore.

It is possible that the status quo in the Taiwan Strait will persist. Tsai Ing-wen could accept the 1992 Consensus during her May 20 inauguration, satisfying Beijing's request. Asking for a detailed Taiwan policy is a bridge too far, but given the stakes involved, America's presidential candidates should start thinking – and talking – about how they will approach dealing with China and Taiwan. The public deserves, at the very least, to be aware of the storm clouds gathering over the Taiwan Strait.

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