

Commentary



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Change of the guard: The Biden presidency and the future of Western engagement with Taiwan

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Barring a successful bid by President Donald J. Trump to overturn the outcome of the November 3 elections, Joe R. Biden of the Democratic Party will become the 46th president of the United States on January 20, 2021. For Taiwan, the change in administration not only carries the usual uncertainty over continued American support and security guarantees, but it comes after four years of unprecedented engagement between the superpower and the threatened democratic island-nation, all of this amid greater assertiveness by the People's Republic of China (PRC).

This paper argues that while the tone of US policy toward China and Taiwan is likely to become less bellicose under a Biden administration, we can nevertheless expect continuity in Washington's overall approach to the trilateral relationship. This is largely due to a structural shift in Sino-American relations stemming primarily from a bipartisan reckoning with the failure of engagement with the PRC (Haver 2020), a reality which has become increasingly difficult to ignore since the emergence of Xi Jinping in late 2012 (McGregor 2019) and China's behavior during the COVID-19

pandemic in 2020.

Before turning to what a Biden administration's China and Taiwan policy will likely look like, it is essential that we first discuss the factors, structural and idiosyncratic to the Trump administration, that shaped US policy toward the two Asian countries over the past four years. This paper concludes with an assessment of the implications of a Biden presidency for Canadian policy toward China and Taiwan.

The Trump Curveball

It is quite ironic that supporters of a closer relationship between Taiwan and the US have come to be associated with the Trump camp. Four years ago, when Trump, an outsider to the Republican Party, caused a major upset by defeating the Democratic candidate, Hillary Rodham Clinton, most analyses tended to adopt a pessimistic view of Taiwan's place within Washington's future Asia policy.

A transactional Trump, it was said, would not hesitate a second to trade Taiwan for a good deal with China (Cole 2017). Furthermore, democracy – one of Taiwan's key distinguishing features to counter Beijing's claims of sovereignty over the island – was clearly not going to be one of the areas of priority for President Trump, who handed various Cabinet positions to individuals from the Radical Right end of the spectrum. Trump's ostensible affinity for despots such as China's Xi Jinping, Russia's Vladimir Putin and North Korea's Kim Jong-Un only exacerbated fears that Trump and Taiwan's new president, Tsai Ing-wen, would have difficulty aligning their interests.

And yet, even before taking office, Trump accepted a congratulatory call from President Tsai (Phillips, Smith and Woolf 2016) and later hinted at the possibility that the US could abandon its longstanding "one China" policy (Chin 2016). Many at the time – including an infuriated Beijing – attributed these departures from the norm to Trump's inexperience or advice from radical aides. However, although Trump subsequently went back on his comments about "one China," the next four years dispelled any notion that Washington would return to the *status quo ante* in its relationship with China and Taiwan. Instead, Trump launched a trade war against China, and the US military became increasingly willing to challenge efforts by the Chinese to subjugate the region, particularly in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait.

Meanwhile, once the false start at the Department of State was resolved with the departure of Trump's first Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, and his replacement by Mike Pompeo, US engagement with Taiwan quickly deepened: arms sales became routine, and senior Cabinet-level officials visited Taiwan on a number of occasions. America's *de facto* embassy in Taiwan, the American Institute in Taiwan, inaugurated its new building in northern Taipei, a

mid-sized embassy with marines, albeit in civilian garb, ensuring security. Bilateral and multilateral initiatives, such as the Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF), which eventually attracted participation by other governments (American Institute in Taiwan 2020), and the Religious Freedom Forum (Office of the President of the Republic of China 2019), were unmitigated successes and a demonstration that Taiwan not only had a role to play in democracy promotion within the Indo-Pacific and beyond, but that Washington recognized it as an essential partner in those efforts.

The Global Engagement Center supported a number of initiatives in Taiwan, chiefly aimed at countering authoritarian influence, while nongovernmental organizations involved in democracy promotion, such as the Democratic Party-affiliated National Democratic Institute and the Republican Party's International Republican Institute, both moved toward the establishment of a permanent presence in Taiwan. The National Endowment for Democracy increased its involvement with Taiwan, and its counterpart, the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy, played an instrumental role in making many of the above bilateral efforts possible. In Congress, meanwhile, bipartisan support for Taiwan resulted in a series of acts, signed into law by Trump, that sought to help Taiwan defend itself against deepening efforts by Beijing to isolate it internationally.

Unsurprisingly, Taiwanese and their supporters welcomed this renewed interest in Taiwan along with Washington's willingness to challenge China on various fronts – trade, Huawei, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, human rights, and so on. For Taiwanese in the “deep green,” pro-independence camp, Trump assumed quasi-religious status, which explains why several of them expressed consternation in November 2020 when it appeared that he had lost the election to Biden. Many, in fact, were willing to join other China critics in believing the various conspiracy theories positing that the election had been “stolen” by the Democrats and “liberal media.” In their view, not only was Biden from a party that, in the past, had been soft on China, but revelations in 2020 of potentially problematic business deals between his son, Hunter, and Chinese interests, among them the China Energy Fund Committee, raised the spectre of conflicts of interests and undue influence at the White House (Duehren and Areddy 2020).

Trump no doubt entered the White House with the intent of acting as a wrecking ball and to dispense with business as usual, which in his view his predecessors had been guilty of, resulting in a weakened US internationally. Much of this was fuelled by a tendency toward isolationism, which both Trump and many of his followers regarded as necessary to “Make America Great Again.” Left unsaid by many watchers is the fact that while Trump’s impolitic style may have differed markedly from mainstream Republican Party policy, his position on China, and the belief that a correction course was imperative, were conclusions that politicians, academics, political commentators and ordinary citizens across the political spectrum had either already

reached, or would eventually do so as a result of China's behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thus, rather than being the outcome of "Trumpism," a policy that was simultaneously more critical of China and more inclusive toward Taiwan was likely to emerge regardless of who occupied the White House. Unfortunately for Taiwan, Trump's authoritarian tendencies (Diamond 2019) vis-à-vis the press, immigration, racism and LGBTQ rights and abortion (on the latter two issues Trump did a *volte face* to appease his ultraconservative supporters in Evangelical circles (Nelson 2019)), disrespect for allies and comradeship with unpalatable heads of state (Cooley and Nexon 2020), made it easy for Beijing and critics of US foreign policy to discount increasing US engagement with Taiwan as a legitimate policy. This fuelled the claim that Taiwan was signing a Faustian deal by aligning itself with the Trump administration.

Little was said, however, of the fact that Trump himself wasn't particularly involved in the crafting of his administration's Taiwan policy, or that US government officials at all levels – at the State Department, the National Intelligence Council, the Department of Defense and elsewhere – were all adamant in their desire to do more with Taiwan after what they regarded as years of neglect. Even though Trump may not have cared much about democracy promotion, one of the great areas of success in US-Taiwan engagement over the past four years has been in that very department. This is as clear an argument as we'll get that one should never over-personalize government policy – American policy is no monolith; rather, it is crafted and carried out, every day, by thousands of officials across the government system. A great many of them, furthermore, had extremely negative views of President Trump. But they chose to stay in the system, and whatever the reason, their margin of manoeuvre was wider than it had ever been.¹

Even if inadvertently, Trump undoubtedly accelerated a process of disengagement with China and attendant re-evaluation of the value of Taiwan as a regional partner – though this would have occurred even in his absence, if perhaps in more careful fashion. It will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for his predecessor to overturn those trends, even if the rhetoric comes in a softer formulation. The age when the US looked the other way when China broke international law, committed rampant human rights violations and threatened regional stability – from Bush Sr. to Obama – are over.

While there is much that we can be critical of with regards to Trump's four years in office, the scorecard is not entirely negative. If nothing else, his administration has brought about a recognition of Taiwan's value that was long overdue, and launched avenues for engagement that should be resilient enough to withstand a change in government.

Exit Trump, Enter Biden

The Tsai administration has already signalled its intention of working with the Biden administration, highlighting its good relationship during the sunset months under President Obama. Its democratic model of governance and successful handling of the COVID-19 pandemic have already earned it congratulations by Biden (Tandon 2020), who also congratulated Tsai upon her re-election in January (Hsu 2020; Wang and Wu 2020). While his Asia policy will be predicated in large part on the people he appoints at State, the National Security Council and the Pentagon, many factors will ensure a modicum of continuity that favours Taiwan and counters the more troubling aspects of China's ambitions.

Although Beijing has indicated its preference for a Biden administration – likely due to the fact that Trump's trade war has caused greater harm to China's economy than Beijing will let on – the Chinese leadership's hopes could soon be dashed (*Global Times* 2020). China's destabilizing and expansionist behavior under Xi, the repression of its own people and undermining of democracy worldwide will not cease with a new administration in the Oval Office, and thus will make it difficult for Biden to call for a policy U-turn (Baer 2020). Public opinion has turned negative toward China (Pew Research Center 2020). When added to Republican control of the Senate, it also means that from day one Biden will find himself in a position where he needs to demonstrate his ability to stand firm on China, even should he be inclined to act otherwise.

This, in fact, is highly reminiscent of the position in which Democrat presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson found themselves following the “loss” of China in the 1940s. As Brian VanDeMark observes, Kennedy and Johnson:

learned to err on the side of being too tough in their approach to the world. From the China experience they became convinced that a country could not be lost to Communism without astronomical domestic political consequences. They learned not to question or reexamine foreign policy assumptions, at least publicly. If they did, they worried that most Americans would not understand, Kennedy and Johnson, anxious to protect their right flank, consciously took account of those elements, even if they did not share all of their assumptions. (VanDeMark 2018, 121-122)

The likelihood of a Republican majority in Senate also means that the opposition can refuse or delay confirmation of appointees to key positions in the Cabinet, especially individuals who are perceived to be too “soft” on China. High support for Taiwan in Congress, meanwhile, will result in continued pressure on the Executive branch of government to continue the trend from recent years. The same will obtain in national security circles and in the media.

In an era of greater awareness of authoritarian influence in democracies and rising skepticism of China’s “peaceful” intentions, the greater emphasis that a Democratic administration is expected to place on democracy promotion both within the US and globally should also result in greater opportunities for involvement by Taiwan. Thanks to the unprecedented publicity that Taiwan’s model has received during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Biden administration will find it difficult to argue against Taiwan’s inclusion in global efforts to defend and expand the democratic sphere. Four years of deepened engagement and participation by other countries in initiatives like GCTF probably have been sufficient to normalize Taiwan’s presence and ensure the continuation of such endeavors, especially as the officials involved in engagement, particularly at the Department of State, will conceivably remain in their positions under a Biden administration.

After dealing with COVID-19 at home, one of the Biden administration’s first priorities will be to repair the US relationship with its allies across the Atlantic and beyond (Lawder 2020). Repairing the reputational damage that has been caused to the US during the Trump era – much of it warranted, some inflated by a refusal by European government officials to transcend their resentment for Trump and the attendant inability to identify allies across the American government – should also strengthen a fragmented democratic coalition. Renewed US leadership within that camp, combined with continued engagement with Taiwan, could conceivably lead to other major democracies to follow the US lead and in turn deepen their bilateral exchanges with Taiwan, much as Japan, Sweden and the Czech Republic, among others, have already done under Trump.

A new premium on democracy, led by a US president who embraces this means of governance, should create new avenues for Taiwan. The replacement of Evangelical and Far Right conservatives from key government positions² following Biden’s inauguration will also encourage greater interconnectivity between the US and Taiwan on the promotion of liberal values, chief among them LGBTQ rights, press freedom, and green energy.

Implications for Canada

Throughout the Trump era, Canada has retained an overly conservative and careful approach to its engagement with Taiwan while experiencing inevitable shifts in its perceptions of China, mostly due to the “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy adopted by Chinese ambassadors (MacCharles 2020), the kidnapping of Canadian nationals Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor, as well as the Meng Wanzhou affair (Pickford and Collins 2020). A tense relationship with the US over trade may also have undermined Ottawa’s willingness to participate in US-led initiatives while tainting US engagement with Taiwan as solely Trump adventurism.

The removal of the Trump irritant, along with assumed continuity in Washington’s engagement with Taiwan on democracy promotion, should encourage Ottawa to initiate a more sustained – and public – relationship with Taiwan on such matters, possibly as part of a more multilateral approach.³ Lacking its own democracy promotion agency, Canada should nevertheless seize the opportunity created by a repaired relationship with the US to strengthen its involvement in fora that include Taiwan, such as GCTF. Renewed US leadership in multilateral institutions should also result in greater coordination among leading democracies calling for Taiwan’s meaningful participation in specialized UN agencies, which in recent years has been blocked due to Chinese interference (Chen and Cohen 2020). As a champion of multilateralism, Canada must continue to push for Taiwan’s inclusion in such fora, and should also join allies in encouraging Taiwan’s joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

With the high likelihood that the Biden administration will include policy-makers who were instrumental in initiating the US “pivot” or “rebalancing” to Asia during the Obama administration (Campbell 2016), we can expect that US Navy patrols in the South China Sea and in the Taiwan Strait will continue. Canada, along with like-minded partners, should continue to play a role in this initiative, which has an important role in ensuring freedom of navigation and deterring destabilizing PLA activity in the region.

Finally, continuity in US policy toward Taiwan under President Biden should dispel the notion that deepened engagement was a temporary aberration made possible by Trump. Many countries, Canada among them, arguably waited on the sidelines and were reluctant to join the fray lest involvement in what proved to be a temporary exercise result in an erosion in their relationship with China. A demonstration that US-Taiwan ties are sustainable and bipartisan will go a long way in convincing other countries that it is in their own national interest to work more closely with Taiwan on various issues, even if still within the limits set by their own “one China” policy. Continued US leadership will also ensure that doing so is survivable for small and medium powers.

About the author



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Endnotes

- 1 This author's personal experience is a clear example of the new opportunities for engagement that arose during that period, resulting in unprecedented participation in various consultations with US government agencies, among them the Department of State, the Department of Defense, and the National Intelligence Council, among others.
- 2 Such as the Council for National Policy and the Family Research Council.
- 3 Canada has actively participated in, and in some instances hosted, closed-door fora in which representatives from Taiwan were present. This includes the Halifax International Security Forum and the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism conference.



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