

Commentary



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Will Taiwan miss US President Donald Trump? A scorecard

J. Michael Cole

In less than a week, an unprecedented and troubled era in American politics will come to a close when Donald J. Trump, the outlier who took the Republican Party, and then the United States, by storm in 2016, passes the baton to the Democrats' Joseph R. Biden. For some in Asia, Trump's defeat in last November's elections presages a return to a status quo ante that leaves them apprehensive of American retrenchment or worse – abandonment at the hands of a resurgent, autocratic China. For them, the Biden administration is expected to reset the US-China relationship that President Trump, in their view, rightly upended, bringing the region back to the Obama years, when China's growing ambitions arguably benefited from American and global permissiveness.

Many, if not most, Trump supporters in Taiwan and elsewhere in East Asia believe that the atypical president's style and vision, such as it was, provided a necessary shock to a system that was no longer suited to address the challenges posed by authoritarianism in the 21st century. Harnessing the forces of populism and dispensing with diplomatic niceties of old, Trump assumed, in the eyes of many, messianic characteristics that could not countenance electoral defeat; rather than accept the reality of American democ-

racy, many of his supporters across Asia internalized the far-right's refusal to recognize reality and the wild conspiracy theories that have been disseminated on alternative and social media.

Days after the crisis caused by Trump supporters' assault on the Capitol on January 6 (*Washington Post* 2021) and the president's attempt to violate the US constitution by overturning the election results (Weaver 2021), Trump supporters could not bring themselves to admit that the presidency had taken a dark turn that threatened the very survival of American democracy. For his admirers in Taiwan, Hong Kong and elsewhere, it seemed that President Trump's very serious transgressions mattered less than his willingness to stymie China.

President Trump's legacy will be a very mixed one indeed. And it will be indelibly marred by his role in the constitutional mess that surrounded his exit from the Oval Office. It would nevertheless be invidious to describe his Asia policy, and that toward Taiwan more specifically, as a complete failure. In fact, Trump's non-traditional approach to policy-making, and the correction course that his administration engineered when it comes to America's relationship with China, made possible a policy vis-à-vis Taiwan that was more appropriate to the times. Even before Trump's election, bipartisan agreement had already begun to challenge the tenets of Western engagement with China, which held that integrating it into the international order would compel it to embrace liberal values. Yet it was his administration that finally began moving policy in a direction that better reflected the situation.

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During the past four years, bilateral ties between Taiwan and the US undoubtedly shifted both quantitatively and qualitatively. While retaining the "one China" policy that governs US relations with both the People's Republic of China and Taiwan, American engagement with its democratic partner became broader, more substantive, and more frequent. US arms sales to Taiwan – totaling US\$11.8 billion in 2020 alone (Xinhua News Agency 2020) – were more frequent and included defence articles more suited to Taiwan's needs. Arms sales were also "de-packaged," ensuring a more efficient acquisition process and timely delivery to Taiwan (Jennings 2019). Contact between American officials and their Taiwanese counterparts also increased, involving more senior officials in more official settings (Westcott 2020).

Various forums, including the highly successful Global Cooperation and Training Framework, or GCTF (American Institute in Taiwan Undated), also fostered collaboration between the two countries on a variety of issues, from

information literacy to disease control and good governance. Other countries, such as Japan and Sweden, eventually joined GCTF as full participants. In Congress, bipartisan support for Taiwan, meanwhile, resulted in a number of bills that sought to help Taiwan counter Beijing's efforts to isolate it internationally (*Focus Taiwan* 2020). And late in the Trump administration, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that the US Department of State was lifting all self-imposed limitations on contact between American and Taiwanese officials (US Department of State 2021). In place for decades, those restrictions were unnecessary and humiliating to officials from a country that has successfully transitioned to democracy and proven to be a reliable partner to the US.

All of this should have occurred a long time ago, when it became obvious that China was not becoming a responsible stakeholder. While President Trump probably does not wake up in the middle of the night worrying about Taiwan's fate, his legacy will be to have permitted the system that operated under him to revise longstanding assumptions about Taiwan, and to take the first steps in deepening and, where possible, normalizing US relations with the Asian democracy. None of this would have been possible without the direct participation – and often the initiative – of officials and civil servants at the National Security Council, the Department of State, the Department of Defense, the intelligence community and other agencies who toiled, often quietly, to bring the relationship to an unprecedented level of complementarity.



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The leadership on the part of American civil servants also set the example and encouraged other governments to take risks by working more closely with Taiwan on issues such as democracy promotion, combatting authoritarian influence, good governance, cyber defence and, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, international health cooperation. Whether it occurred by design or, arguably, as an offshoot of the president's other priorities, it must nevertheless be acknowledged that Taiwan benefited from a more wholesome relationship with the US under Trump. Some of those initiatives would conceivably have occurred under a different administration, but it is difficult to imagine that the pace of closer engagement would have been this rapid. President Trump's unorthodox tendencies thus served as a catalyst for a course correction on Taiwan, taking the US closer to a policy that regards Taiwan both as a partner in countering China and an entity worthy of engagement in its own right.

All of this is what has convinced supporters of President Trump in Taiwan that his remaining in office is indispensable for Taiwan's survival. This view, however, ignores trends within American society, government institutions, academia and the media, which already favoured Taiwan. Therefore, the consolidation of a bipartisan consensus with regards to Taiwan's value and the necessity of challenging a resurgent China would have occurred with or without Trump, although that process would probably been slower, and somewhat less overt, under a different president.

For all the short-term advantages for Taiwan, the Trump presidency nevertheless contained elements that inadvertently threatened the island-nation's interests. It could be argued that while net benefits were achieved in the US-Taiwan relationship under his watch – benefits that any subsequent administration should retain and build upon – Taiwan still found itself in a precarious position, its survival as threatened today as it was prior to Trump's election by the spectre of Chinese military invasion. (Despite substantial arms provisions from the US over the past four years, Taiwan remains unable, without US assistance, to counter a sustained invasion attempt by the People's Liberation Army.) For their part, more frequent patrols by the US military in or near the Taiwan Strait have proven reassuring to Taiwan and may have deterred military adventurism by China, but the strategy failed to prevent a major uptick in Chinese military activity around Taiwan since early 2020.



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Similarly, despite the Trump administration's pushback and vocal support for pro-democracy activists, Hong Kong has for all intents and purposes fallen, with Beijing consolidating its grip on the former British colony (Human Rights Watch 2020). The same, sadly, can be said of the situation in Xinjiang, where more than one-and-a-half million Uyghurs are now detained in concentration camps despite more robust criticism and policies by the Trump administration (Graham-Harrison 2020). Even as its economy suffered the effects of trade sanctions initiated by the Trump administration, Beijing remained undeterred, continuing to build up its coercive capabilities and to engage in behaviour that threatened to destabilize the region.

More significant still, and arguably a major moral blind spot among Trump supporters in Asia, is the long-term threat that the Trump phenomenon poses to the international community as whole. President Trump has created a more polarized and ultra-conservative America, one that is driven by far-right, white Evangelical ideology, and in which facts, the media, and decency were coming under increasing assault. Trump hijacked the Republican Party and

took it rightwards (Seib 2020), transforming it from the traditional base of American conservatism into a party that at moments shared disturbing similarities with despotic regimes abroad. His approach to governance has also been described as “chaotic,” (Dickerson 2020) which in times of crisis can have disastrous consequences.

While upending politics on the domestic front, Trump launched an assault on the international liberal order, created after World War II under US leadership, that has contributed to global stability. At a time of autocratic resurgence, Trump’s behavior has undermined longstanding alliances, weakened global institutions by pulling the US out of them¹ (Cooley and Nexon 2020) and created such a mess domestically that America’s reputation as a leader of the free world suffered a tremendous blow. Challenged by revisionist regimes like China and Russia, the proper response isn’t to destroy the international liberal order, as Trump has sought to do, but rather to reinvigorate it. The alternative that Trump has proposed is, as John Ikenberry (2020) argues, “a more chaotic and interdependent world.”



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By fragmenting the liberal democratic order, President Trump was creating an opening for illiberal states like China, Russia and Iran to further weaken its structures while presenting an opportunity for such regimes to propose an alternative, with disastrous consequences for democracy worldwide. By narrowly focusing on short-term gains in the US-Taiwan relationship, Trump supporters among the Taiwanese have been ignoring the damage that Trump’s proto-fascism has been causing both to American democracy and the international liberal order (Snyder 2021). And there is little doubt that, over time, a fractured, leaderless and diluted liberal international order would be detrimental to Taiwan’s continued survival.

In fact, the passions which President Trump has awakened and harnessed among the American far-right has spread illiberalism around the world, empowering undemocratic politicians who have sought, sometimes successfully, to replicate his formula to achieve power. Taiwan experienced something like this with the ultraconservative Christian movement against the legalization of same-sex marriage and the emergence of the populist outlier Han Kuo-yu who, after hijacking the opposition Kuomintang (KMT) in 2018 through tactics that bore an eerie similarity to those used by Trump (Cole 2019), challenged President Tsai Ing-wen in the 2020 presidential elections.²

It is too soon to tell whether President Biden will maintain, and perhaps build

upon, the new foundations of a closer US-Taiwan relationship that were erected during President Trump's tenure. The incoming administration speaks the language of democracy and multilateralism, and Biden himself is on record saying that the US must continue to closely engage with Taiwan (Cole 2020; *Focus Taiwan* 2021). Such rhetoric is encouraging, but it will take more than that to convince the people of Taiwan that they have a dependable partner in the White House. However, what is more certain is that in the long-run, the Biden administration is much more likely to repair and reinvigorate a liberal international system that is hospitable to, and essential for the survival of, a threatened democracy like Taiwan. In fact, incorporating Taiwan into a modernized international liberal order, one that is better adapted to meet the current challenges, is an indispensable complement to the more frequent bilateral engagement that has marked US-Taiwan relations under Trump.

This can be achieved by including Taiwan in a "consortium of like-minded states" that seeks, as Ikenberry writes, to "collectively underwrite a reformed liberal order." That consortium, furthermore, need not be constrained by efforts by the Biden administration and the international community to collaborate with illiberal regimes like China on global issues such as pandemic control and global warming. In fact, the current order (or disorder) calls for the creation of a new system that strikes a balance between strengthening the club of liberal democracies and, where necessary, working with illiberal regimes. In no way does this entail abandoning Taiwan; rather the opposite. Taiwan should be more firmly integrated into the liberal consortium.

President Biden likely will endeavour to recreate a political environment in the US that is bipartisan, non-zero-sum, and less destructive than the one envisioned by Trump and his more extreme supporters (Baker and Glasser 2020). We can also hope that the deadly violence that occurred at the Capitol on January 6, as well as revelations that pro-Trump groups may be planning more violence in the lead-up to Inauguration Day on January 20 (CNN 2021), will spark a reckoning within a Republican Party that has lost its moral compass. Mainstream Republicans must regain control of their party and prevent a further slide into American authoritarianism and civil war. Mass unrest in the United States – the only possible outcome should the current polarization and authoritarian drift continue unchecked – would be the worst outcome for Taiwan, a moment of American distraction and disintegration which would most assuredly invite Chinese aggression.

About the author



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Endnotes

- 1 Under President Trump the US has withdrawn from the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). It has also removed itself from, among others, the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, the Paris Agreement, and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) over Iran's nuclear program.
- 2 Han lost, but nevertheless managed to obtain 5.5 million votes against the incumbent's 8.17 million.



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