



Sigur Center
for Asian Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

The 2020 US Election Results and Implications for Taiwan

Just as the transition from President Barack Obama to President Donald Trump marked a significant change in policy towards Taiwan, so too might the transition to President Joe Biden. Against the greater backdrop of China's rise and great power competition, this relationship is one of strategic importance to both countries. The Sigur Center welcomed a panel of experts to speak on US-Taiwan relations and their predictions for the Biden administration: Robert Sutter, Professor of Practice of International Affairs at GWU; Sarah Trister, Foreign Policy Advisor to Senator Edward Markey; Hung-jen Wang, Associate Professor at National Cheng Kung University in Tainan; and Lev Nachman, Visiting Scholar at National Taiwan University in Taipei. The event can be found [here](#).

Overall, the panelists were cautiously optimistic the new administration will continue to strengthen America's relationship with Taiwan. However, they warned Biden is likely to take a more conciliatory approach with China. Taiwan maintains strong bipartisan support in Congress which can bolster any favorable actions or counter any unfavorable actions by the new administration. In order to move U.S. interests forward in the Indo-Pacific while concurrently challenging China, the United States should promote multilateralism, democratic values, alliances, and regional cooperation, all of which favor Taiwan's own position.

Continuity versus Shift in Perspective

Sutter noted how Trump broke from the previous US foreign policy trend of trying to avoid provoking China, and instead turned to an antagonistic China policy predicated on maintaining U.S. might. The

Trump administration's posture towards Taiwan was one of strong friendship and vocal praise, at times seemingly transactional, for example with good-will action towards Taiwan spurred by the Chinese People's Liberation Army's push in the South China Sea. Trump's continued support also provided Taiwan with greater international political clout to push back against Beijing while bolstering U.S. presence in the region. Sutter suggests Biden will likely break from such a tit for tat geopolitically competitive approach and move to a policy based on pursuing economic security.

Taiwan has established itself as a valuable member of the global community, successfully managing its own affairs despite the overshadowing might of China across the Strait. President Tsai Ing-wen has received kudos for her handling of the pandemic, with less than 800 cases since March. Furthermore, Sutter points out that Taiwan is a vital actor in ensuring supply chain security and promoting democracy in the Indo-Pacific, two overarching goals of the Biden administration. As Nachman notes, Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) became the ninth largest company in the world during 2020, largely in part due to an international move away from China's Huawei and ZTE under the Trump administration.

To avoid losing Taiwan's confidence from a perceived lack of importance, Biden should continue to pursue a special relationship with the same zeal as the previous administration. According to Hung-jen Wang, polls showed the general public in Taiwan is fearful of what Biden's victory might mean for their security in the region. Sutter notes that several key Obama Asian foreign policy experts are returning as veterans for Biden and have thus far signaled a possible continuation of Obama's policies in which Taiwan was viewed as a separate issue from China and ultimately sidelined during attempts at reconciliation and appeasement of Beijing.

Commitments to Taiwan

Longstanding bipartisan support in Congress will help assuage Taiwan's concern about potential neglect by the Biden administration. Trister notes that while Biden seems clear-eyed about the threat China poses, he also seems willing to work together to find common ground on issues like nuclear non-proliferation and climate change. This relationship could lead to Taiwan feeling vulnerable, which is why both chambers are committed to lending aid and support to Taiwan whenever possible. Congress passed a Taiwan Relations Act in 1979, one of the first pieces of legislation documenting U.S. commitment and cementing the special relationship between the two countries for the next four decades. Building on that momentum, Congress signed The Taiwan Allies

International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (Taipei Act) into law in 2020, which asserts the United States' commitment to resisting any force oppressing or jeopardizing Taiwan.

The 2018 Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA) is another signal of U.S. commitment to the Indo-Pacific. As Trister explained, the ARIA orients U.S. Asia policy around enhancing its presence in the region and committing to a free, open, and inclusive region predicated on a rules-based international order. Part of the Act details U.S. efforts for environmental conservation, arms control, North Korean sanctions, and dedication to alliances and commitments in the region, in all of which Taiwan is a key component. The ARIA also reaffirmed policy that the United States opposes any effort to change the status quo in the Indo-Pacific apart from a peacefully negotiated agreement, solidifying a continued U.S. presence and deterrent against China for the foreseeable future.

Lastly, China's increasingly antagonistic actions are only strengthening Congressional and executive support for Taiwan. Sutter and Trister posit that while Biden may continue an Obama-era approach of not letting Chinese cyber thefts and South China Sea activity directly affect the relationship with Taiwan, Congress is adamant that Taiwan remains a priority. China's meddling in Taiwan's elections this year as well as military flyovers and increased naval activity in the Strait are strong justifications for drawing the two countries closer together. One outcome is the Taiwan Fellowship Act, introduced in Congress in 2020 and currently up for debate in the House. Similar to the Mansfield Act, this legislation calls on the State Department to create a federal government exchange program with the government in Taiwan, demonstrating commitment while also opening channels for increased communication and awareness-building measures.

A Path Forward: Policy Considerations for the Biden Administration

Nachman argues that a concern for the Biden administration will be framing Taiwan-related actions in a way that does not antagonize Beijing, but instead strengthens Taiwan for its own sake. Taiwan's Representative to the United States, Hsiao Bi-khim, has already spoken with Antony Blinken, Biden's nominee for Secretary of State, exemplifying Taiwan's strategic importance. However, as noted by Wang, the people of Taiwan are nervous about the extent to which the Biden administration will be conciliatory towards China and conversely, whether Taiwan may recede to the background. There was some consensus by the speakers that while Biden's rhetoric towards China will be different from the sharp and direct criticism of Trump, the new administration's actions should remain consistent as pro-Taiwan rhetoric for the sake of rhetoric

will fall on deaf ears. Instead, Biden needs to make the Indo-Pacific and Taiwan, especially, a cornerstone of his administration's foreign policy.

Trister argues that the Biden administration's key goals must include regaining influence in international organizations. The Trump administration withdrew from organizations like the Human Rights Council and the World Health Organization, creating voids that China is able to fill and use to marginalize Taiwan. In Trister's view, these will be key actions for Biden in his first 100 days; a failure to do so will lead to long battles to regain influence. If the United States is part of norm-setting bodies on trade, intellectual property, the cyber domain, and human rights, this influence can be used to raise Taiwan's importance in the international community as a strategic partner. Sutter argues the Biden administration should reconsider a free trade agreement with Taiwan, an idea he acknowledged the Biden team has previously rebuffed. Codifying Taiwan's importance in trade through an agreement will be a confidence-building measure in the US-Taiwan relationship.

Prospects

It is clear that Taiwan will have an increasingly important role to play under the Biden administration as great power competition with China continues to grow. While the Biden administration may take a more conciliatory tone towards China than the Trump presidency, it is important to continue the level of support and recognition offered to Taiwan under Trump. Otherwise, there could be lasting ramifications in the level of trust that Taiwan places in the United States under a Democratic administration. The panelists all agreed that the Biden team should strive to maintain the current trajectory in relations with Taiwan. To that end, the general conclusion was that any forward momentum, even if it means taking actions that antagonize Beijing, is preferable to neglecting Taiwan.

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About the Rising Powers Initiative and Sigur Center for Asian Studies

The Sigur Center's Rising Powers Initiative examines how domestic political debates and identity issues affect international relations in Asia. RPI acknowledges support from the MacArthur Foundation and Carnegie Corporation of New York for its activities.

The Sigur Center for Asian Studies is an international research center of The Elliott School of International Affairs at The George Washington University. Its mission is to increase the quality and broaden the scope of scholarly research and publications on Asian affairs, promote U.S.-Asian scholarly interaction and serve as the nexus for educating a new generation of students, scholars, analysts and policymakers. The Sigur Center houses the Rising Powers Initiative, a multi-year, multi-project research effort that studies the role of domestic identities and foreign policy debates of aspiring powers.

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