

THE DETERMINANTS OF US POLICY TOWARDS TAIWAN

HU Shaohua

EAI Background Brief No. 1190

Date of Publication: 23 November 2016

Executive Summary

1. US' secure environment and its democratic system allow for numerous players in its foreign policy. In general, the American public seem disinterested while heterogeneous special interests are rather active.
2. Congress and the president are the two key players, with the president seemingly being the more important. US policy towards Taiwan has been and will be mainly shaped by the interactions between these two.
3. US' preferences in foreign policy include national security, economic benefits, international status and cultural influence in descending order of importance.
4. Chinese control of Taiwan is not in America's interest because it runs counter to all these preferences. American security and economic interests may not suffer much, but its international status and cultural influence will be undermined unduly mainly because Taiwan has been under American protection.
5. As for cross-strait relations, there are three scenarios. Taiwan's reunification with China is the least favourable to American interests since it will boost Chinese power and undermine American dominance.
6. Taiwan's independence seems desirable, but human and monetary costs for all relevant sides will make it less likely. By default, the maintenance of the status quo serves the interest of the United States.
7. In a cross-strait conflict involving Taiwan, China and the United States, China benefits from its large population, geographical size and proximity, and nationalistic fervour. The American economy is stronger and likely to suffer the least; its military is superior, but is hamstrung by the tyranny of distance.
8. Whether the Taiwanese have the will to fight for independence or whether the Americans are willing to fight against China over Taiwan remain unanswered.

Internationally, Washington has more allies, but their assistance may be more symbolic than substantive.

9. Almost all mainland Chinese desire reunification, while most Taiwanese prefer independence; the United States will discourage either side from upsetting cross-strait balance and seek to maintain the status quo.