

AMERICAN PUBLIC OPINION AND CROSS-STRAIT RELATIONS

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Executive Summary

1. Since Donald Trump won the presidency, US policy towards Taiwan has undergone tremendous changes. Both parties and branches of the government have been warmer to Taipei and cooler to Beijing. The question is whether the American public has the same view.
2. V O Key defines public opinions as “opinions held by private persons which governments find it prudent to heed”. The public, in many American surveys, is separate from the foreign policy elite.
3. The Almond-Lippmann consensus on public opinion in American foreign policy was that it was irrational and volatile; it lacked structure or coherence; finally, it was insignificant in policy decision. Since the Vietnam War, the consensus had been challenged. The consensus thereafter is that the American public’s knowledge of and interest in foreign policy are rather meagre.
4. In general, the American public has little interest in cross-strait relations. Several relevant surveys are revealing. The quadrennial surveys conducted by the Chicago Council for Global Affairs between 1978 and 2002 show that American feelings towards Asian countries are rather stable, not too warm or too cold.
5. Another survey is related to America’s willingness to defend Taiwan. Despite overall reluctance, more respondents support military intervention. In another survey, American favourable attitude towards China has dropped in the past few years.
6. Many factors account for the little attention to cross-strait relations: the limited impact of foreign policy on most people’s daily lives, the security of the United States as ensured by its geographical location and military power, and the unique nature of cross-strait relations.

7. Military intervention in a cross-strait conflict requires the activation of public opinion and the seeking of public support. If the American government opts for military intervention, it will have the skills to educate and manipulate public opinion.
8. Public opinion will change as the war goes on. If the war goes well – the cost is low, the benefit is great and the chance of winning is high – the public will continue to support the war. If the cost of war in money and life is exorbitant, and the prospect of winning is slim, public opinion will want a halt to the war.