

**HOW CONTENDING IDENTITIES AND
PARTY POLITICS SHAPE TAIWAN'S
EXTERNAL POLICY**

WANG Wei-cheng, Vincent

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Executive Summary

Against the backdrop of China's rapid military buildup, the inability of Taiwan's legislature to pass the budget for purchasing the 2001 weapons package approved by the U.S. Bush Administration due to partisanship has puzzled analysts and strained U.S.-Taiwan relations.

The phenomenon can be examined in the light of Taiwan's policies toward China, which are intertwined with Taiwan's ethnopolitical divisions, national identities, party politics, and exacerbated by electoral competition.

Taiwan's ethnic division is politically salient. The population includes 70 percent Minnan, 14 percent Hakka, 14 percent Mainlanders, and two percent Aborigines. The Hakka, Mainlanders, and Aborigines traditionally support the KMT (Chinese Nationalist Party), whereas the DPP (Democratic Progressive Party) is predominantly a Minnan party.

The impasse inherent in Taiwan's current executive-legislative relationship and role reversals of the major parties, which result from a divided government in which the Pan-Green controls the executive branch, but the Pan-Blue holds the majority in the legislature, add to the intensity of Taiwan's party politics. Increasing partisanship as a result of the controversial 2004 presidential elections rendered the arms sales issue a political battle.

Changing national identities – a consequence of Taiwan's democratization – importantly shape Taiwan's electoral politics, because the DPP is mainly a Minnan party that benefits electorally from the rise of Taiwanese identity, whereas the KMT, being a party from China, suffers electorally from the decline of Chinese identity.

Over 80 percent of Taiwan's population prefers maintaining the status quo of Taiwan's relationship with China, seeking neither immediate independence nor unification – an insight that both major parties seek to appropriate. While their ultimate proposals for cross-strait relations differ, their immediate strategies for

managing cross-strait relations are similar.

Pan-Green partisans are more likely to view themselves as “Taiwanese only,” or “both Taiwanese and Chinese.” Viewing Taiwan and China as two separate countries, they see China as a hostile external enemy whose military buildup aims to coerce Taiwan into accepting Beijing’s terms of unification. They thus favor an arms buildup as a deterrent.

Pan-Blue supporters are more likely to consider themselves as “Chinese” or “both Chinese and Taiwanese.” They acknowledge that Taiwan is culturally and historically part of China, and accept a future “one China” when conditions between the two sides of the Strait converge. They argue that threats to Taiwan’s security can be managed politically and oppose Taiwan building up its arms.

With the arms sales impasse partially resolved in June 2007, the approaching 2008 legislative and presidential elections offer the major parties electoral incentives to conduct themselves as responsible stakeholders in Taiwan’s national security policies.