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Biden-Xi Meeting and the Internationalisation of the Taiwan Strait Security

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Taiwan was once again in the limelight in the growing competition between the United States and China. Remarks by President Biden and Secretary Blinken had hinted at a possible shift in the longstanding US position on the island. At the same time, China's growing military capabilities, and recently more frequent incursions in Taiwan's air defence zone and maritime operations in the proximity of the island, had raised concerns on Beijing's intentions with Taiwan. In the November Biden-Xi video conference, President Biden assured President Xi Jinping that the United States maintains its long-standing "one China" policy based on the Taiwan Relations Act, the three Joint Communiques and the Six Assurances. President Xi Jinping in turn assured that China is in no hurry to unify with Taiwan and is willing to strive for peaceful reunification with the utmost sincerity. In a press conference after the meeting, though, Biden said that it is up to Taiwan to determine its future as he believes that this does not contradict the "one China" policy. Other statements by high-level US officials since then, such as that of Assistant Secretary of Defence for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Ely Ratner during a hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, stressed Taiwan's critical value to the defence of vital US interests in the Indo-Pacific, hinting at a subtle but strategic policy shift towards keeping Taiwan away from China permanently. The invitation of Taiwan to President Biden's Democracy Summit has shown Washington's further support for Taiwan, irritating Beijing once more.

What are Taiwan's views of the Biden-Xi meeting and the US-China-Taiwan triangular relations? Does Taiwan see more opportunities or challenges in the great-power competition, especially when it is receiving more support from the United States and some major developed democracies? After the Biden-Xi meeting, Taiwan's spokesperson for the presidential office noted that during the meeting the United States reiterated its commitment to Taiwan and strongly opposed any one-sided actions to change the status quo or undermine peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. He further emphasised that Taiwan's position has always been

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clear: “not to yield when under pressure and not to take any risks when supported”. On the other hand, Taiwan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs has criticised the Chinese official media for deliberately misinterpreting US statements or positions after bilateral meetings. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Washington has alerted Taipei more than once to the possibility of Beijing over-interpreting the US-China dialogue without seeking Washington’s clarification. This time, while Beijing’s post-meeting statement said that Biden has promised not to support Taiwan independence during the meeting, Washington’s did not mention anything about Biden’s position on Taiwan independence.

A week after the Biden-Xi meeting, Taiwan’s Prospect Foundation organised a forum on “China’s Development Issues and Prospects for Cross-Strait Security”. Prominent Taiwanese academic and think tank scholars presented and discussed their studies on the forum topics, two of which are on China’s confidence- or anxiety-based international behaviour, and challenges from the emerging internationalisation of cross-Strait security to the conventional security paradigm. Forum speakers’ views may represent mainstream voices in Taiwan’s think tank and academic circles. The Biden-Xi meeting, with its potential impact on not only US-China relations, but also US-China-Taiwan triangular relations, was also discussed by some speakers at the forum.

On the question of whether Beijing’s assertive international behaviours are indicative of its confidence or anxiety, some forum speakers stressed its anxiety amid growing anti-Beijing sentiments and policies in the West, while some others believed America’s relative decline, especially its poor management of the pandemic, has contributed to China’s growing confidence in its competition with America. A notable view is that Beijing’s tighter control of various political, economic and social issues shows its anxiety in dealing with domestic challenges, which might have been reinforced by international challenges. From this point of view, Beijing’s wolf warrior diplomacy might be rooted more in domestic anxiety than in international confidence, a way of consolidating domestic solidarity through mobilising popular nationalism with international issues. Regardless of Beijing’s confidence or anxiety, forum speakers believed that US-China strategic competition would be a long-term international reality despite the recent Biden-Xi meeting. Interpretations of the Biden-Xi meeting at and outside the forum in Taiwan followed this realistic thinking too: While Biden focuses on building “guardrails” to prevent US-China competition from escalating into deadly conflict, Xi re-emphasises China’s core interests and seeks a more equal and cooperative G2 relations with the United States; neither of them shows a strong will to adjust their grand strategy for the competition, including their positions on the Taiwan issue, and both try to mobilise public support thereafter with their own positive interpretations of the meeting.

In this context, no one would expect cross-Strait tensions to ease anytime soon, and Taiwan would have to prepare for a possible cross-Strait crisis with the help of some powerful and supportive countries. This leads to a forum topic directly involving Taiwan: whether the recent internationalisation of the Taiwan issue indicates an emerging new cross-Strait security management paradigm. The conventional cross-Strait security management involves China, America and Taiwan in a triangular relationship, where Washington has adopted strategic ambiguity towards the Taiwan issue, hoping to deter China from attacking Taiwan, while deterring Taiwan from claiming *de jure* independence. As US-China competition intensifies, the United States not only increases its support for Taiwan, but also encourages its allies and partners to announce explicit concerns for cross-Strait stability and implicit criticism of Beijing’s effort in trying to change the cross-Strait status quo. According to a forum speaker’s data, 33 countries including the member states of some important international organisations, such as South Korea, Japan, Australia, Germany, G7, EU, NATO, had followed the US position

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on cross-Strait stability in their own or joint announcements with the United States. Some of these countries have also sent warships to the Taiwan Strait and/or the South China Sea to demonstrate their capability and will to maintain stability in this region. Evidently, more countries have become involved in the Taiwan issue and some scholars call this new trend “internationalisation of cross-Strait security management”.

All the speakers welcome this new development, believing that involving more supportive countries in the Taiwan issue will enhance Taiwan’s security. Meanwhile, they urged the Taiwanese government to increase its military budget and work arm in arm with society to improve Taiwan’s capacities in comprehensive security in military, economic, technology and other areas. On the other hand, they realised that internationalising the Taiwan issue had brought more difficulties to Taipei’s future interaction with Beijing and possibly escalate cross-Strait tensions. Nevertheless, they seemed to believe that for Taiwan the benefits from this new trend are much more than the costs and risks incurred. Speakers also agreed that even if the paradigm shift is happening, it would take years before the new paradigm replaces the current one dominated by China and the United States. It was also pointed out that even if more countries were involved in managing cross-strait security, a peaceful resolution to the Taiwan issue is not guaranteed, as evidenced by the six-party talks on North Korea’s nuclearisation.

Hence, the forum speakers are cautiously optimistic about the emerging trend of internationalising cross-Strait security, seeing more opportunities than challenges in political, economic, military and international areas thanks to growing support from not only the United States but also some other democratic countries.

Under rising pressures from China and sharing almost the same political and economic ideologies with other democracies, it is understandable that most Taiwanese scholars also share similarly negative assessment of China’s recent development and prospects particularly when China has been facing rising domestic and international challenges, while Taiwan has been enjoying more domestic and international opportunities since its President Tsai won the re-election in 2020. Taiwan’s gross domestic product growth rate in 2020 was higher than China’s for the first time in three decades and the highest in Asia. Taipei’s successful management of the pandemic has significantly contributed to its economic growth and increasingly popular international image. Taiwan’s TSMC is the world’s largest semiconductor company, a plus to Taiwan’s strategic value to the West amid the great-power competition. Taiwan also attended the Summit for Democracy with over 100 countries, while China was not invited. Both these encouraging developments and China’s increasing threat have contributed to rising Taiwanese nationalism and Taiwan’s confidence in confronting China.

On the other side of the Taiwan Strait, China for all its complexities and problems has surprised the world for over four decades with its strong resilience, resulting in rising nationalism among not only government officials, but also ordinary Chinese. Therefore, encouraged by their respective rising nationalism, it is less likely for either side to make substantial concessions in their confrontation, especially with the involvement of the United States. In a sense even the US-China competition may be viewed as a clash between American and Chinese nationalism as not only the two governments confront each other in the name of national interests, but also ordinary Americans and Chinese share their governments’ concerns and antagonism against the other side. Nationalism provides a convenient source of legitimacy to the government, improving solidarity between the government and society in Taiwan, China and the United States, respectively. Therefore, from the perspective of nationalism, a certain level of tensions with a national enemy may help the government to consolidate its legitimacy. However, this is

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also clearly not helpful for de-escalating tensions between China and the other two players, Taiwan and the United States.

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