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TIME TO STRAIGHTEN OUT AMERICA'S TAIWAN POLICY

**Beijing's rapidly increasing military spending means
Washington can't afford to take Taipei for granted.**

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Editorial by Rupert Hammond-Chambers¹

News that Beijing is ramping up military spending by 12.7% this year is raising eyebrows in many quarters, and planners in other capitals will be discussing how best to respond for some time to come. As far as Washington is concerned, a large part of that conversation ought to involve America's relationship with Taiwan. Steadily improving relations between Taipei and Beijing in recent years have eased many headaches for America, but not cured them. The mainland's military modernization, much of which is aimed at projecting force into China's neighborhood, is a reminder that Washington still can't afford to ignore this democratic island.

On the surface, Taiwan's situation looks solid, particularly as rapprochement with China is in its third year. But the cross-Strait relationship is increasingly dominated by China, whose ultimate intentions are not sincere. America remains distant and distracted, and evidently afraid that appearing to lend "too much" support to Taiwan might endanger other attempts at Washington-Beijing cooperation. This was clear in the statement from January's state meeting between Presidents Barack Obama and Hu Jintao in Washington: The U.S. lauded the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) between China and Taiwan. But Mr. Obama made no mention of China's aggressive defense posture in the Taiwan Strait, nor did he mention any aspect of the growing military imbalance. His secretaries of state and defense likewise made only opaque references to China's military build-up in the run-up to President Hu's visit.

The normalization and liberalization of cross-Strait trade is an important development, and Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou deserves considerable praise for the courage he has shown on this issue. Yet it is not acceptable for America to consider ECFA the only dynamic aspect of today's cross-Strait environment. China's ever-increasing military investments are having a huge impact on the cross-Strait status quo, and are challenging America's entire view of Asia-Pacific security.

Economic trends across the Strait in no way alter the deep antipathy the people of Taiwan have toward unification with China. The people of Taiwan are proud of what they have accomplished in economic growth and democracy, and do not wish to abdicate those gains to Beijing. Meanwhile, the island has become the most important global technology partner for American companies, producing a large portion of the technology that we use to increase personal and business productivity.

Research, design and manufacturing all are done in close trans-Pacific cooperation between Taiwanese and American companies. The recent severing of Chinese rare earth exports to Japan should focus minds on supply-chain security and how reliable we feel our business partners are, particularly when intellectual property is involved. Some Americans have argued that America's relationship to China is too valuable to jeopardize for Taiwan's sake. But America also benefits from its ties to Taiwan.

Against this comes what is described as a realist view of U.S.-Taiwan ties. Charles Glaser, a professor at the George Washington University in Washington, expresses this outlook most clearly when he suggests that if

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the U.S. were to sever its ties to Taiwan, China would no longer feel compelled to contemplate a cross-Strait conflict and the way would be clear for America to pursue closer ties to Beijing.

But this assumes that Taiwan is the only potential irritant in relations between China and America and that other policy differences—over trade, U.S. forward military deployment, the status of North Korea, Tibet, and a host of others—all stem from a relationship poisoned by disagreements over Taiwan. The notion that China would become more pliant to U.S. concerns and demands or that war would be less likely should we step aside and allow China to annex Taiwan does not hold water. Taiwan's strategic geographic position is an essential link in the first island chain of defense and provides Japan and to a lesser extent Korea important security guarantees. The loss of Taiwan would result in a recalibration of Japan and Korea's security posture including the possibility of Japan developing nuclear weapons. It would also open the western Pacific to China's increasingly robust blue-water navy whose global role China still has yet to explain.

A more realistic view would be that America's interests are best protected by encouraging peaceful cross-Strait ties, and that peaceful relations between Beijing and Taipei are most attainable when both sides come to the table from relatively strong positions. This can allow the people of Taiwan to embrace economic cooperation without the fear that political absorption would be an inevitable result, while also discouraging policy makers on the mainland from growing too assertive.

President Ma has attempted to do this, but Taiwan cannot continue to chart this course in the absence of U.S. support. This support has to materially challenge China's growing military threat, and should therefore include the continued sale of weapons—such as F-16s and submarines—that can update Taiwan's military arsenal. U.S. support must also include expanding and improving the level of direct government-to-government communication by resuming U.S. cabinet officer visits to Taiwan—suspended by President George W. Bush in 2002. Finally, Taiwan should be part of any American initiative to expand free trade in Asia, whether through the Trans-Pacific Partnership multilateral trade talks or through a bilateral free trade agreement.

The lack of ambition in Washington for its bilateral relationship with Taiwan is deeply troubling. China understands all too well the opportunity of this moment, and it is pressing hard in the face of a passive America. For the sake of the people of Taiwan, and to protect American interests in Asia, we can only hope that the Obama administration begins to grasp how emboldened China is becoming with regards to Taiwan.

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