



STRAIT AHEAD?

**CHINA'S FIFTH GENERATION LEADERS
AND BEIJING'S TAIWAN POLICY**

By Jacques deLisle

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Beijing's current Taiwan policy is likely to remain in place as the People's Republic of China (PRC) begins a transition from the so-called fourth-generation leadership headed by President and Party General Secretary Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao to the fifth generation leadership headed by Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang. This shift, which will formally begin in 2012, may be accompanied by leadership changes in the other two polities that matter most for cross-Strait relations, with the incumbent presidents in Taiwan and the United States both facing reelection challenges. Given the crisis-prone history of cross-Strait relations during much of the last decade and a half, the common connection between changes in leadership and changes in policies, and the risk of an adverse reaction in Beijing to the content or outcome of the presidential campaign in Taiwan, the relatively bright prospects for sustaining current cross-Strait policies are a reflection of the remarkably strong—but still possibly insufficient to prevail—interests and preferences favoring continuity and stability in China's Taiwan policy.

IF IT AIN'T BROKE, DON'T FIX IT

Cross-Strait relations have been going well for China by any reasonable measure and by Beijing's apparent metrics. The fears former President Chen Shui-bian stoked that Taiwan was creeping—and at times rushing—toward formal independence have subsided rapidly since he left office in 2008 and fell into political disgrace with his prosecution and conviction on corruption charges. In the years since, there has been no recurrence of the tensions and crises that marked cross-Strait relations from the middle 1990s through the end of Chen's presidency (on some occasions triggered by Beijing's reaction to what it saw as unacceptably pro-independence moves by Chen or his predecessor Lee Teng-hui). Since Ma Ying-jeou assumed the presidency in Taiwan in 2008, cross-Strait relations have been characterized not only by stability but also by substantial warming, including the signing of a landmark free trade area-like agreement (the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA)) and more than a dozen other accords on commercial and financial issues. Although there have been some minor points of friction, nothing during Ma's first term threatened seriously to reverse the trend toward greater closeness and reduced risk of crises.

The PRC fourth-generation leadership's policy choices have contributed significantly to this welcome (in Beijing, at least) progress in cross-Strait ties and maintenance of an acceptable status quo on the difficult, sovereignty-implicating political dimensions of Mainland-Taiwan relations. The cross-Strait policy of Hu Jintao has proceeded from an embrace—or re-embrace—of the fundamental premise that time is on Beijing's side. Moves by Lee and Chen, electoral gains by the often-called “pro-independence” Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), and evidence of a rising sense of Taiwan identity raised alarm in Beijing that Taiwan might get away or slip away. But, for PRC proponents of a policy of patience, there was the contrary argument from confidence. On this view, Beijing's agenda would gain from: the large and growing economic and social ties across the Strait, the ongoing—if at times troublingly ambiguous and at times stalled—evolution of the PRC toward social, economic and perhaps legal and maybe even political structures that look less threatening and alien to many Taiwanese; and the seemingly inexorable shift in the balance of military capabilities across the Strait and between China and Taiwan's principal protector, the United States.

Whatever the underlying calculus, Hu Jintao-era Taiwan policy undertook a basic shift in principle from an agenda of seeking

reunification to an agenda of preventing independence. Although basic elements of the policy reorientation date to a few years earlier, the most elaborate and formal instantiation of this pro-stability and crisis-avoiding approach was, ironically, an occasion for controversy and confrontation in cross-Strait relations: the Anti-Secession Law of 2005. The legislation was adopted to push back against what Beijing saw as the then-latest in a series of moves by Chen Shui-bian to push too far on independence or state-like status for Taiwan. The law's most provocative and widely discussed provision contemplated the use of force in the event of an attempt at "secession" by Taiwan. In truth, there was little new of substance: Beijing had consistently asserted its international legal right and policy option to use force to recover Taiwan (although it preferred peaceful reunification); and the "attempted secession" trigger for the use of force was no more bellicose in substance than the "three ifs" set forth in the PRC's 2000 White Paper on Taiwan (that China might use force if Taiwan "separated" from China in any name, were "occupied" by foreign countries—viz., the United States, or refused indefinitely to engage in negotiations for reunification). Nonetheless, given the political context of cross-Strait and U.S.-China relations at the time, the special formality and solemnity of National People's Congress legislation, the rhetoric from PRC sources that accompanied the law, and the commotion that generally surrounds any initiative that seems to tinker with the established but delicate framework of language and principles concerning the Taiwan issue, the Anti-Secession Law unsurprisingly stoked cross-Strait tensions and arguably harmed China's interests, at least in the near term.

Still, the immediate political fall-out should not obscure the law's key structural features or its connection to the basic Hu-era policy of supporting, for an indefinite period, a status quo that worked tolerably well for the PRC, across much of Taiwan's political spectrum (including Ma's Kuomintang), and, in turn, for the United States. The Anti-Secession Law was indeed strongly assertive (although not new) in its core principle: Taiwan is a part of China that has not been, and will not be, separated from China. But the law also included a foundation for moderation and stability in practice: since Taiwan had not left China, there was no pressing need to take action to reunify Taiwan with the motherland. This point is clearer if one contrasts the Anti-Secession Law with an alternative considered at the time: a Reunification Law. A Reunification Law would have been much less provocative in principle, implicitly conceding that Taiwan was to some degree (and perhaps to a very great degree) separate from China. But such a law would have been more destabilizing and threatening in practice: because non-unification was for Beijing an ultimately intolerable state of affairs, there would be considerable pressure to establish a timeline and articulate concrete steps or conditions for achieving reunification.

In the period since Ma came to office in Taiwan, the Hu administration's cross-Strait policy has included: a de facto diplomatic truce (with Beijing suspending efforts to induce—and reportedly rebuffing a handful offers from—Taiwan's remaining diplomatic partners to switch formal ties from Taipei to Beijing); acceptance of a modest expansion of international space for Taiwan (including, most notably, "Chinese Taipei's" participation as an observer at the World Health Assembly meetings beginning in 2009); and ECFA and other cross-Strait arrangements that have been, in narrow economic terms at least, fairly generous to Taiwan. Such measures have seemingly helped to calm the fear or sense of desperation in some quarters in Taiwan that had generated support for Chen Shui-bian's more confrontational and risky policies. And they helped to flesh out a scenario in which stability and ongoing improvement in cross-Strait relations offer a significant upside for Taiwan.

Hu-era policy toward Taiwan follows and builds upon China's longer-term learning about how to engage Taiwan's democratic politics, specifically its presidential elections. This bodes relatively well for policy continuity as the final Taiwan presidential election of the Hu years (in January 2012) draws near. The arc of Beijing's approach has been striking. In the run-up to Taiwan's first fully democratic presidential election in 1996, China launched missiles near Taiwan to deter what it saw as a pro-independence agenda being pursued by then-President Lee Teng-hui with a troublingly high level of American support (including in the form of allowing Lee to go to the U.S. and make what Beijing regarded as a recklessly envelope-pushing speech at his Cornell reunion). What followed was a resounding electoral victory for Lee and deployment of U.S. naval forces in a show of force near the Strait. Four years later, Beijing adopted a milder but still (to Taiwanese) provocative and ham-fisted approach to deter voters from supporting the "pro-independence" DPP candidate Chen Shui-bian. China released its second White Paper on the Taiwan issue (including the famous "three ifs" that articulated the relatively expansive conditions under which Beijing might feel compelled to use force), and Premier Zhu Rongji scoldingly warned the electorate in Taiwan not to choose Chen. Although causation is, of course, hard to prove, it is widely thought that China's strategy backfired as Chen won a plurality in a three-way race.

For the 2004 election, Beijing again dialed back its tactics. China somewhat clumsily cozied up to the Kuomintang (KMT) candidate Lien Chan. Once again, Chen eked out a narrow and disputed victory, and plausible assessments held that Beijing may have hurt Lien's chances by energizing the DPP base and by making more credible to wavering median voters the DPP's argument that a KMT victory would risk "selling out" Taiwan. By 2008, Beijing seemed to have learned the wisdom of mostly sitting on the sidelines. China left no doubt that it preferred Ma and would be more forthcoming in dealing with a KMT-ruled Taiwan, but it did not cast a possible DPP victory as anathema and the DPP's candidate Hsieh Chang-ting as a pariah. The 2008 campaign was, of course, more complicated than this, with Ma (as well as Hsieh) upsetting Beijing by criticizing the PRC's handling of the Olympics and unrest in Tibet—something which may have helped Ma's already strong prospects by undercutting suspicions in Taiwan of an overly close Ma-PRC alignment.

This trend of increasingly moderate tactics and increasingly (if one takes margin of victory as well as outcome into account) acceptable results, the compatibility between a low-key, accommodating approach to elections and the broader Hu-era Taiwan strategy, and the Chinese leadership's clear preference for a Ma victory all portend Beijing's relative restraint and eschewal of crisis-provoking approaches to the 2012 presidential contest in Taiwan.

WHAT XI WANTS AND WHAT XI GETS...

China's leaders now rise to the top through processes that provide only limited clues about where, within the broad parameters of the Reform-Era consensus, they might lead China on relatively specific issues. Success at the highest level in Chinese politics involves a good deal of winning the favor of more senior generations of top leaders and hewing to their agendas. The system provides few occasions for rising leaders to make public announcements of bold or distinctive policy proposals. Still, several considerations suggest that Xi Jinping and the leadership group he heads are likely to opt for continuing the Hu Jintao-era approach to Taiwan.

First, China's increasingly—but still very imperfectly—institutionalized process for succession produces gradual leadership transitions. The baton will not pass from Hu, Wen and the fourth generation to Xi, Li and the fifth generation with the dramatic suddenness, or the potential for sharp policy reversals, that one sees when an outgoing U.S. president boards Marine 1 for the last time and his successor marches into the Oval Office. Indeed, observers of Chinese politics have become accustomed to viewing the transfer of power in China as likely to be at least a two year process. The “new” leader may not come fully into his own and articulate his signature positions until five years in, at the Party Congress that “reelects” him to a second and final term. In such a setting, major policies of the preceding generation (such as the Taiwan policy of the Hu years) are relatively well insulated from abrupt revision.

Second, the advent of China's fifth generation leadership is likely to continue—or at least not reverse—the downward trend in the relative stature of the top leader. In terms of individual authority to achieve significant change in important policies, Deng Xiaoping was no Mao Zedong, and Jiang Zemin was no Deng. Hu Jintao had little if anything over Jiang in this regard, and there is little expectation that Xi's relationship to the rest of the top elite will be much more than first among relative equals. In this context, even after the preceding generation of leaders fades from the scene, significant policy reorientation is comparatively difficult because it requires a degree of top-elite consensus that China's top leaders once did not need to achieve.

Third, as newly ensconced and still-unconsolidated leaders of a regime that has been doing quite well (with its economic success and rising international clout) but that also faces significant and inescapable challenges (including discontent rooted in economic change, inequality and ethnic separatism), Xi and the fifth generation leadership are likely to see themselves as having little to gain and potentially much to lose from an unnecessary crisis of their own making. A big change in a generally successful Hu-era Taiwan policy risks triggering such a crisis. And, absent an unlikely clear provocation from the Taiwan side, deteriorated cross-Strait relations are relatively unlikely to trigger the kind of external crisis that can, under some conditions, rally domestic opinion behind a regime struggling with low levels of domestic support or legitimacy.

Fourth, Xi Jinping is generally seen as a cautious rising leader (as is Li Keqiang). This may reflect particular character traits, or lessons learned in a long climb up the contemporary Chinese political ladder, or, at least in Xi's case, the aversion to radical political change that one might expect from children of the revolutionary generation top elite who fell precipitously during the convulsions of the Cultural Revolution. Whatever the reasons for Xi's (or his colleagues') perceived lack of adventurism, if the perception is accurate, it implies that a significant reversal of Hu's cross-Strait policies is unlikely to transpire as part of some broader reorientation of Chinese politics and policy toward greater militancy or radicalism.

Fifth, Xi's earlier career has led many on both sides of the Strait to infer, plausibly, that he will favor a moderate and accommodating cross-Strait policy consistent with the pattern laid down under Hu. Although political biography is far from a perfect predictor of future policy preferences, Xi spent roughly a decade in the early to middle part of his career in Fujian, Taiwan's nearest neighboring province and a major beneficiary of inbound cross-Strait investment. Xi later moved on to top posts in Zhejiang and Shanghai—provincial-level entities that, like Fujian, greatly benefited economically from links with Taiwan. (For Fujian and Zhejiang, the connection between Taiwan and the economic performance that is now crucial to the success of provincial and local-level Chinese politicians—and to the regime as a whole—is deeper still: those areas suffered economically in the Mao years partly because China's central planners were reluctant to steer precious capital to a region that was seen as vulnerable to an attack from Chiang Kai-shek's enemy regime across the Strait.) Ever eager to read the tealeaves, media sources in Taiwan have run reports that Xi has particular understanding of, and concomitant sympathy for, Taiwan, and has relatives who live on the island.

Moreover, Xi has at least one foot (and quite possibly both feet) in the camp of the “princeling party” (*taizidang*)—a moniker that refers to the fact that many of them, like Xi, are the offspring of members of former top leaders. The princelings, who hold the upper hand among the fifth generation leadership, have served primarily in China's booming gold coast (as Xi has) and are generally more favorably disposed to the policies of growth over equity (across both regions and classes) and growth

driven by economic engagement (including with Taiwan) associated with former President and General Secretary Jiang Zemin.

Finally, Xi's likely Hu-like preferences on Taiwan policy may matter relatively much. Assessments of Beijing's Taiwan policymaking under the fourth generation leadership typically conclude that Hu Jintao exerted especially strong influence over cross-Strait policy, achieving and maintaining his preferred orientation despite pressure for a harder line from some quarters (including, on many accounts, the People's Liberation Army) and notwithstanding a general turn toward a more assertive (and, in some characterizations, aggressive) turn in Chinese foreign policy. The pattern of the top leader wielding comparatively great influence over issues concerning China's "unrecovered" territories (principally, Taiwan and, before that, Hong Kong and Macao) and, more broadly, over foreign policy issues has much precedent under Hu and his Reform-Era predecessors. Although perhaps short of an entrenched norm of PRC elite politics and policy, it may give Xi somewhat more leeway in pursuing the Taiwan policies he prefers, particularly to the likely considerable extent that those policies maintain continuity with those of the preceding period.

CHINA'S ENDURING AIMS AND INTERESTS

Important Chinese policy goals and interests—ones that extend well beyond the issue of Taiwan—favor continuity, stability and crisis-avoidance in cross-Strait relations. This is likely to remain the case as China moves beyond the era of the fourth, and well into the era of the fifth, generation leadership.

First, China's new assertiveness in foreign policy during the latter years of Hu's rule—on issues ranging from the South and East China Seas to several aspects of U.S.-China relations to China's roles in international institutions—has undone many of the gains from China's "charm offensive" and China's apparent accumulation of soft power earlier in the decade. The dictum of *taoguang yanghui*—essentially, downplaying China's rising power—was always ambivalent (coupled, even in Deng's initial formulation, with the imperative of *yousuo zuowei* / accomplish things), and it was sure to become unsustainable as China's capabilities inexorably grew to a level where they might threaten neighbors and potentially deter U.S. intervention. But it has served China's interests and given Chinese leaders reason not to hasten the fading strategy's demise by bullying Taiwan.

A much more powerful China faces growing concern and scrutiny concerning its intentions. For the outside world trying to discern China's proclivities, Taiwan is something of a canary in the coalmine. Given a cross-Strait military balance tilting ever more heavily in the mainland's favor, China's firm and long-standing ideological and legal position that Beijing has the right (and perhaps the obligation) to use force to protect its long-identified "core interest" in sovereignty over Taiwan, and the sensitive place of Taiwan in U.S.-China relations, signs that Beijing is belligerent or coercive toward Taiwan will receive outsized attention. Although China would surely try to portray any such measures toward Taiwan as purely a domestic matter with no bearing on the PRC's truly "international" behavior, much of the world—including China's neighbors and the United States—may well not see it that way. On the other hand, Beijing likely can tout a sustained period of tolerance for the status quo and voluntary progress in cross-Strait relations as evidence of its benign intent toward the outside world in generally.

Second, and more broadly, China under the fifth generation leadership has a continuing fundamental interest in a stable and peaceful external environment (including across the Taiwan Strait) to help achieve its still-primary goal of economic development. To be sure, China is now sufficiently awash in capital that drawing foreign investment is not likely to be the priority it once was. And the crucial role that exports have played in China's growth will decline given the likely lasting flattening of consumer demand in the developed world, the growing pressure China faces from the U.S. and others to level the playing field in trade and to allow its currency to appreciate, the long-term unsustainability of an export-led growth strategy for the world's second largest economy, and the increased reliance on domestic demand that predictably accompanies China's greater affluence and efforts to address severe economic inequality. Nonetheless, China's deep integration with the outside world, its enormous export sectors, and its still-daunting development tasks mean that a fundamental reorientation will not occur in the near term. For the fifth generation leaders, like their predecessors, the domestic economic growth imperative endures as a powerful driver of a foreign policy that seeks stability and good relations abroad. Cross-Strait relations are likely to remain a particularly visible and significant part of those external relations. And, in the closing years of fourth-generation rule and likely into the period of fifth-generation rule on the mainland, Taiwan has been an especially bright spot in Beijing's otherwise increasingly friction-ridden interactions with the outside world.

Third, one factor that has long been corrosive of positive cross-Strait relations might be fading. For many years, the Taiwan issue—and particularly the imperative to deter Taiwan independence and develop capabilities to address the contingency of conflict with the U.S. over Taiwan—was a principal justification for the Chinese military's large and growing claim on China's national resources. On this front, the importance and utility of the Taiwan issue are headed for a decline. The relatively low level of tensions across the Taiwan Strait since 2008 and the prospect that this will continue well beyond 2012—even as other aspects of China's external relations have become more contentious—has meant that considerations of where China might use military force (and thus the argument for building martial capacity) have shifted to other scenarios, such as the South China or East China Seas, or perhaps a potentially collapsing North Korea, or even a rising India. In addition, China articulates increasingly far-flung national interests and pursues international roles that lie far beyond its immediately

adjacent waters and the islands therein. These now include: keeping open the sea-lanes of communications through Southeast Asia and to the oil-rich Middle East; protecting Chinese raw material-extraction investments in Africa; and even snuffing out piracy off the coast of Somalia. Moreover, the capabilities that seem to be next on the agenda for China's military enhancement are ones for which Taiwan-centered scenarios provide no justification: base access along the Indian Ocean, aircraft carriers, and the means to project force and defend interests to the second and third island chains off China's coast.

With the emergence of such Taiwan-unrelated reasons for investment in military capabilities, there is less reason for those who favor such agendas to gin up threats centered in the Taiwan Strait. Because such asserted perils are, of course, more plausible when cross-Strait relations are poor, the rise of these other rationales reduce one set of incentives for the PLA and other proponents of robust defense spending to push a tougher line in Beijing's Taiwan policy.

MA—AND TSAI—ARE NOT CHEN...BUT CHINA MIGHT SAY THEY ARE

Finally, there are, of course two sides (and, given the U.S.'s role, sometimes three sides) to cross-Strait relations. At least in the relatively near term, political developments in Taiwan are not likely to give Beijing good reason to revise a Taiwan policy that was created and developed in the far more challenging context of Chen Shui-bian's presidency in Taiwan. History may be kinder to Chen and render a more complex verdict than the opprobrium now widely heaped on the former president and convicted criminal. He might—or might not—enjoy partial rehabilitation, rooted in recognition of his contributions to Taiwan's initial democratization, the rise of one of Taiwan's two major political parties, Taiwan's democratic consolidation, and the maintenance of Taiwan's international autonomy (whether because he pushed back against an assertive Beijing and a more China-accommodating KMT, or because his failed pro-independence gambits inadvertently taught Beijing that it could weather the Chen storm and, thus, afford to be patient on cross-Strait issues). Whatever the fate of Chen's reputation, Taiwan's leaders and prospective leaders show little inclination to return to the confrontational tactics that caused such consternation in Beijing and conflict in cross-Strait relations.

Ma Ying-jeou's agenda has been, and—absent some exogenous shock—is very likely to remain, pursuit of stability and progress in cross-Strait relations, reaping the benefits of economic growth and external stability that such progress can offer, while avoiding—or at least postponing—the more difficult and potentially destabilizing questions of political accommodation, political integration and sovereignty. Ma has embraced the 1992 Consensus (a sort of Beijing-Taipei agreement to disagree often characterized as “one China, two/respective interpretations”), supported a policy of “mutual non-denial” between the governing regimes in Taipei and Beijing, characterized cross-Strait relations as “Taiwan-Mainland” rather than “Taiwan-China,” and regularly invoked the sovereignty of the Republic of China and respect for the ROC constitution (which has not abandoned a one-China ideal). While these positions are well short of Beijing's ideals, they are clearly preferable to what China's fourth generation leadership had to endure from Ma's predecessor.

Ma's chronically anemic approval ratings and the results of polls of voters conducted only months before the January 2012 election suggest that Ma might lose to Tsai. But a Tsai victory is unlikely to presage a return to the policies and methods of the Chen era. Although there is much debate in Taiwan and on the Mainland about Tsai's true policy preferences, her political style is far removed from that of the DPP's firebrand first president and is often characterized as similar to Ma's. More significantly, Tsai, like Ma, faces the constraints inherent in Taiwan's democratic politics. The median Taiwanese voter—and arguably the broad mainstream of public opinion—generally favors the cross-Strait status quo and some form of cross-Strait rapprochement. It does not (under current or plausible future conditions) favor formal independence or other status quo-threatening moves. A return to Chen's confrontational approach (like, at the other end of the political spectrum, a policy of rapid progress on cross-Strait political issues) is not a winning political strategy for a president, or presidential candidate, in Taiwan.

Nonetheless, Taiwan's presidential election—and, more precisely, the possible reaction to it in Beijing—poses the greatest near-term threat to continuity in Beijing's Taiwan policy and stability in cross-Strait relations. In the PRC's Taiwan policy circles, there is much suspicion that Tsai is little different from Chen. Critics point to her work on Lee Teng-hui's famous—and to Beijing deeply provocative—locution that cross-Strait relations were “state to state” (a position that PRC sources regularly deride as a “two-state thesis”) and to more recent statements she has made as DPP chairwoman and seeker of the DPP's presidential nomination. Especially if the presidential contest remains close, Tsai's tactics likely will include, among other things, rallying the “deep green” or “pro-independence” activist base. And that predictably entails rhetoric Beijing will deem highly provocative.

At the same, a formidable Tsai challenge and familiar DPP charges that the KMT-led government is too accommodating toward China will press Ma to work harder for median voters whose positions are nearer the DPP's than are those of the KMT's more “blue” base. Any such moves from Ma will resonate with a narrative, already prominent in the mainland, that Ma is “too much take and too little give” in his dealings with Beijing and the suspicions, long-held in some PRC quarters, that Ma is a closet Chen Shui-bian or at least a thinly veiled Lee Teng-hui.

The meaningful prospect of a Tsai victory—and even a victory by a more China-criticizing Ma—complicates Beijing's already

difficult strategy of trying to help Ma win. The concern, often voiced among China's Taiwan policy mavens and observers of Beijing's Taiwan policy, is that any concessions or accommodations offered to Taiwan in the run-up to the presidential election will redound to the benefit of an intractable DPP-led administration or to a reelected Ma who might be committed to his relatively tough campaign rhetoric, who would not need Beijing's help for any future election, and who therefore might be all the more recalcitrant when Beijing presses Taiwan to move from "economic" to "political" issues in cross-Strait talks.

The PRC's leadership transition increases the risks of volatility. In Beijing, visions of a radically Chen-like Tsai or a seriously and perhaps increasingly unaccommodating Ma holding the presidency in Taiwan could easily start to look like evidence of failure of Hu's relatively soft Taiwan policy. And that could bring trouble. For Hu, Taiwan policy is a major "legacy" issue. Given the unresolved problems of social unrest at home and the growing anxiety and resentment concerning China's behavior abroad, it also has become the best hope for an unambiguously positive final entry on Hu's resume. If this outcome seems imperiled or if critics and opponents of Hu's Taiwan strategy see an opening, Beijing could reverse the largely successful trend toward moderation and stability-promotion in its approach to Taiwanese presidential elections. A return to threats and tension-ridden cross-Strait relations would become much more likely in the run-up to Taiwan's 2012 balloting and beyond.

Moreover, the calculus in Beijing could be still more complex—and thus might oscillate into more radical shifts in Taiwan policy—given additional sources of political uncertainty on the other two sides of the triangle. Whoever the victor is in Taiwan's presidential balloting (and especially if it is Tsai), the now-customary moment for offering Beijing highly formal and relatively mast-binding reassurance will not come for more than four months after the election. The decision to hold the presidential and legislative elections at the same time has doubled the lag between presidential election and presidential inaugural speech in Taiwan. And with a possibly close and likely polarizing presidential campaign unfolding in the United States, it may be difficult for observers in Beijing to predict whether the American president will see a possible foreign policy dust-up with China over Taiwan as a danger that threatens, or an unsought opportunity that could enhance, his political fortunes.

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