

BOOK REVIEWS

Managing America's Relationships with East Asia

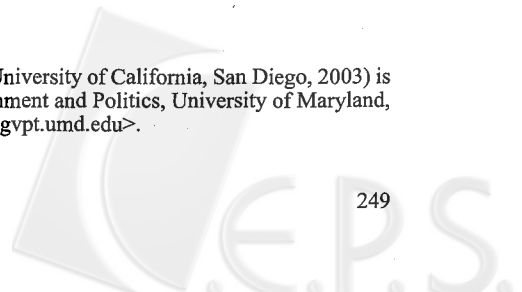
SCOTT L. KASTNER

ALAN D. ROMBERG. *Reign in at the Brink of the Precipice: American Policy toward Taiwan and U.S.-PRC Relations.* Washington, D.C.: Henry L. Stimson Center, 2003. ISBN: 0-9747255-4-4.

ROBERT G. SUTTER. *The United States in East Asia: Dynamics and Implications.* Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003. ISBN: 0-84768-725-2.

Even as the end of the Cold War and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, have transformed America's relations with much of the world (including East Asia), solutions to some of Washington's most vexing challenges in East Asia have remained elusive. The question of Taiwan's sovereign status, for example, remains as much a challenge and a barrier to closer Sino-American cooperation today as it did thirty years ago. Two recent books—one by Alan D. Romberg and one by Robert G. Sutter—will prove valuable to anyone interested in America's role in East Asia, and the challenges faced by Washington in the new century. Romberg's *Reign in at the Brink of the Precipice* provides a detailed analysis of how U.S.

SCOTT L. KASTNER (Ph.D. in Political Science, University of California, San Diego, 2003) is Assistant Professor at the Department of Government and Politics, University of Maryland, College Park. He can be reached at <skastner@gvpt.umd.edu>.



policymakers have managed the Taiwan issue since the early 1970s, with broad implications for current and future American policy toward the Taiwan Strait. Sutter's *The United States in East Asia* examines more broadly the primary issues affecting East Asia, the priorities of various East Asian governments, and the implications for American policy toward the region.

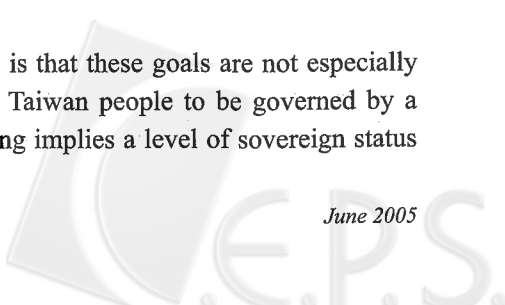
Reign in at the Brink of the Precipice

Since Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1972, the issue that has both most consistently blocked closer Sino-American cooperation and sparked the most severe crises in bilateral relations has been the status of Taiwan. Romberg writes, in fact, that "the Taiwan question is the only issue in the world today that could realistically lead to war between two major powers" (p. 14). In his meticulously researched and interesting book, Romberg carefully examines the key issues relating to Taiwan that have influenced U.S.-China relations since the Nixon opening. The focus throughout is on American policy: the factors underlying U.S. stances on the Taiwan question; the decision-making process behind shifts in those stances and the bargains reached with Beijing on the issue; and subsequent American deviations from those bargains, either deliberate or as a result of carelessness. It is these American deviations from previous Taiwan-related bargains, Romberg argues, that lie at the heart of many of the crises that have characterized U.S.-China relations since normalization.

Romberg's own normative views on the Taiwan issue closely parallel the objectives U.S. policymakers have generally tried to achieve in the Taiwan Strait:

I have approached these matters with a certainty about the critical importance of positive and productive U.S.-PRC relations, a belief in the centrality of maintaining peace and stability in the Pacific, and a strong sense of empathy for the people in Taiwan and their right to live under a system of their own choosing—along with a firm conviction about U.S. responsibility to help assure all of that (p. 10).

America's dilemma, of course, is that these goals are not especially compatible. Any right held by the Taiwan people to be governed by a political system of their own choosing implies a level of sovereign status



that is denied by Beijing. Moreover, given Beijing's adamant position on this issue, any concrete measures taken by the United States to help assure that Taiwan will indeed have the capacity to choose its own future immensely complicate the task of maintaining positive and productive U.S.-PRC relations.¹

American policymakers thus try to determine how much of a commitment Washington can make to Taiwan without rendering a positive Sino-American relationship impossible to achieve. Beijing, conversely, tries to determine the extent to which it can demand that Washington drop its commitments to Taiwan without pushing so far that U.S. policymakers conclude that the benefits of stable Sino-American relations are no longer worth the price Beijing demands. Fortunately, that U.S.-China relations have at times been quite positive since the 1970s indicates that a bargaining space exists between each side's respective reservation point on this matter—or, at least, such a space sometimes exists.² How then can we account for the frequent turbulence associated with the Taiwan issue that characterizes U.S.-PRC relations?

In my reading of Romberg's analysis, at least three factors on the American side have at times contributed to Taiwan issue-related tensions in U.S.-PRC relations. The first is the most straightforward: sometimes

¹Indeed, the dilemma facing U.S. policymakers has become more difficult over time. Recent events have reinforced the importance of the contradictory goals that lie at the heart of the dilemma. In an era where promotion of democracy abroad is a primary component of American grand strategy, the democratization of politics in Taiwan increases the U.S. interest in the preservation of the island's autonomy from Beijing. Meanwhile, the recent crisis on the Korean Peninsula and the War on Terror have served to enhance the importance of a positive Sino-American relationship. At the same time, democratization in Taiwan—and the concomitant loss of influence of pro-reunification mainlanders in Taiwan politics—has also changed the potential consequences of U.S. efforts to preserve stability and Taiwan's autonomy from Beijing. In this changed environment, rather than delaying reunification, U.S. commitments to the island may instead facilitate what the PRC calls creeping independence. Beijing, in turn, can be expected to view any American support for Taiwan with increasing alarm. In short, concurrent with a growing American interest in jointly maintaining a stable relationship with China while insuring substantial autonomy for Taiwan is a growing incompatibility between those very two objectives.

²In this context, each side's reservation point is defined as the bargain relating to Taiwan (how much of a commitment the United States makes, in terms of recognition, arms sales, etc.) that makes it indifferent between maintaining a positive and stable Sino-American relationship or not.

the most generous offer America is willing to make with regard to Taiwan is still beyond Beijing's reservation point. As a case in point, it seems clear that China's minimum demands for normalization during much of the 1970s were still beyond the maximum concessions that American decision-makers were willing to make regarding Taiwan. At the start of the Ford administration, for example, U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger identified the issue of Taiwan's security as the key stumbling block in achieving normalization of U.S.-PRC relations: "We do not wish to be seen as forcing Taiwan into an integration with Peking that it does not want, nor abandoning Taiwan to ... invasion by the PRC" (pp. 63-64). Kissinger hoped that the U.S. defense treaty with the ROC might be declared "moot," rather than officially terminated, after U.S.-PRC normalization. Deng Xiaoping (鄧小平), however, "flatly rejected" this general approach of preserving some residual defense commitment to Taiwan (p. 65). Beijing clearly preferred to delay normalization until the United States could "sever diplomatic relations (with the ROC), withdraw the troops (from Taiwan), abolish the treaty" (p. 66). However, due to a number of factors, including domestic political constraints, Washington was unprepared to meet Beijing's minimum demands, and so normalization had to wait.

A second cause of periodic turbulence in U.S.-PRC relations centers on American uncertainty over the precise location of Beijing's reservation point. China, of course, has a clear incentive to overstate its bottom line when bargaining with the United States over the Taiwan issue: though Beijing might say that some U.S. policy is unacceptable, talk is certainly cheap. Ultimately, it is Beijing's costly actions—like postponing normalization until Washington yielded on certain issues—that make statements by Chinese leaders credible. For this reason, to obtain an accurate portrayal of China's willingness to tolerate a change in U.S. Taiwan policy, it might be necessary for Washington to observe how Beijing actually responds to a policy shift—in other words, to risk provoking a crisis with the PRC. Romberg's account suggests this sort of dynamic may have been largely responsible for the crisis over arms sales that erupted early in the Reagan administration: "... the crisis was not primarily due to any misunderstanding of the deal struck in normalization. Rather, it was because Ronald

Reagan simply did not care for the deal. What he may have misunderstood, or at least miscalculated, was the price Beijing was willing to pay to enforce its terms" (p. 143).

The final, and clearly the most unfortunate and avoidable, source of periodic tensions in U.S.-PRC relations that stems from the American side might be termed carelessness. Here, Washington unwittingly stumbles across Beijing's reservation point (that the PRC has credibly spelled out in advance) on some Taiwan-related issue. One theme that emerges in Romberg's study is that a "lack of precision" in U.S. Taiwan policy "has often been due not to purposeful deliberation, but to inattention to the meaning of words, to the relevant history, and to the seriousness of the issues to both Taiwan and the PRC" (p. 11). Romberg clearly sees carelessness along these lines as being a major contributor to the crisis that erupted following Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui's (李登輝) trip to Cornell University in 1995. Although the decision by the Clinton White House to grant a visa for Lee's trip in part reflected domestic political constraints (note that the Congress had voted overwhelmingly, in a non-binding resolution, to approve such a visit), it also "reflected a level of insensitivity, even unawareness, of what was at stake for both Beijing and Taipei." Leaders in mainland China and Taiwan viewed the trip as a "fundamental" political issue centering on the core issue of Taiwan's sovereign status. To Clinton, however, the question was one of "freedom of travel, freedom of speech, and an old man who wanted to visit his alma mater" (p. 175).

Romberg concludes that U.S. policymakers, if they wish to avoid seeing America dragged into serious conflicts between Beijing and Taipei over the Taiwan issue, must "understand the fine texture of the normalization bargain, and not simply ... be familiar with its broad strokes—as has often been the case before" (p. 224). Insensitivity to the stakes involved when dealing with Taiwan-related issues, or carelessness in articulating just what American policy is, has sparked tensions in Sino-American relations that could and should have been avoided. Romberg's account—far more nuanced than the stylized summary I have provided here—is certainly a must-read for anyone interested in U.S.-PRC relations in general or the Taiwan question in particular.



The United States in East Asia

While Romberg's book examines the evolution of a single issue in U.S.-PRC relations, the objective of Sutter's book is much broader: "to provide appropriate context and explanation of post-Cold War dynamics and implications for the United States and East Asia and their various relations" (p. 18). Given the wider focus of the book, Sutter naturally does not examine any one issue or relationship as closely as Romberg studies the Taiwan issue. However, Sutter's book offers an analysis of U.S. relations with East Asia that is both comprehensive and informative.

Sutter's account proceeds in several stages. The first part of the book centers on the United States: a short history of U.S. policy in Asia is followed by two chapters that systematically examine the key issues in current U.S. relations with the countries of East Asia. Chapter four then outlines the primary determinants of dynamics within the East Asian region. While American policies clearly influence international relations within East Asia, Sutter also focuses on such other factors as changing power relations in the region (such as China's rise and Japan's stagnation), anxieties over economic performance in the aftermath of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis, and the dilemmas posed by the freer flow of information across borders. Next, a series of chapters consider policy priorities within China (chapter five), Japan (chapter 6), the two Koreas (chapter 7), Taiwan (chapter 8), and the governments of Southeast Asia and the Pacific (chapter 9). The book's final chapter summarizes key regional trends and issues for the United States, and details implications for U.S. policy toward East Asia. Sutter concludes on a "cautiously optimistic" note. Though domestic issues and preoccupations elsewhere in the world will likely mean that U.S. attention to East Asia will remain at levels that are less than desirable, other trends—including both the continued preeminence of American power and a preoccupation with domestic concerns in most East Asian powers—give reason to hope that stability in the region will be maintained (pp. 222-23). For the sake of being congruent with the first part of the review, the remainder of this essay considers Sutter's treatment of the Taiwan question.

Like Romberg, Sutter sees Taiwan as "the most sensitive and complex

issue in U.S.-China relations" (p. 45): relations across the Taiwan Strait remain a serious source of danger in a region that has seen overall tensions decline after the Cold War (p. 30). Sutter considers factors in all three capital cities—Washington, Beijing, and Taipei—that drive the dangerous dynamics of this relationship. American policy, for example, is influenced to a considerable degree by Congress, the branch of the U.S. government where Taiwan maintains considerable support (pp. 38, 205).³ Domestic politics in Taiwan, meanwhile, play a central role in the determination of the island's policies vis-à-vis Beijing, with the pan-Blue camp favoring a more conciliatory approach toward mainland China than that advocated by the pan-Green camp. These dynamics lead Beijing to have a clear preference for the pan-Blues, as evidenced by China's "united front" efforts to woo pan-Blue politicians while criticizing pan-Green Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) (p. 160). Sutter provides a nice overview of Taiwan politics and how domestic dynamics impact on the island's foreign and cross-Strait policies, focusing in particular on the first half of Chen's first term as President (chapter 8). Finally, in Beijing, unification with Taiwan (and maintaining territorial integrity more generally) is one of three core objectives identified by Sutter; the others include maintaining Communist Party control and achieving economic modernization (p. 108). As in the United States and Taiwan, Sutter views internal politics as an important factor shaping Beijing's Taiwan policy: leaders on the mainland cannot appear soft on Taiwan, lest they be replaced by leaders more attuned to nationalist sentiments within China (p. 205).

One point that might have been developed a bit more here is the tension that exists between China's core objectives, and the implications of such tension. Just as American policymakers face a severe dilemma in dealing with the Taiwan Strait because Washington's goals there are not

³Sutter argues that American foreign policymaking following the end of the Cold War has undergone a shift away from a broadly elitist system centered on the executive branch to a more pluralist system. The new system is characterized by, among other things, increasing Congressional influence over policy combined with a lower degree of consensus over policy goals both within Congress and among the general public (pp. 26-27).

especially compatible, China faces fundamental dilemmas because its goals too are somewhat contradictory. While part of the mainland's Taiwan strategy centers on positive incentives—both political and economic—for the island to inch closer to unification, Beijing's strategy also relies heavily on military threats to deter against Taiwanese separatism. The mainland hopes to persuade Taiwan (and the United States) that Beijing is prepared to pay very high costs—including a devastating war—to prevent the island from formalizing its independence from China. However, a war in the Taiwan Strait could obviously undercut China's development: beyond the destruction involved (especially if the United States were to enter), such a war would almost certainly destabilize China's foreign economic ties, particularly vis-à-vis the United States. So long as no serious crisis erupts in the Taiwan Strait, China can continue to claim both reunification and development as primary goals. However, a military confrontation would force Beijing to reveal which goal is in fact primary, thereby placing its secondary goal—be it unification or development—in jeopardy. This reality closely parallels America's dilemma, as a cross-Strait confrontation would force Washington to choose between maintaining positive relations with Beijing or acting to insure Taiwan's continued autonomy. In other words, both the United States and China have a strong interest in avoiding a serious crisis in the Taiwan Strait.

Unfortunately, this shared interest does not necessarily preclude a crisis from arising. Taiwan, of course, could force both sides' hands by pushing farther toward independence.⁴ Alternatively, the present goals of the PRC or the United States might simply change. A catalyst for such change in China could be social or economic instability, possibilities that Sutter considers at some length (pp. 101-2, 104, 106, 111). In the United States, the value of maintaining a constructive relationship with Beijing could be challenged by economic frictions (see pp. 44-45), or an increased

⁴Sutter's book was completed before cross-Strait relations worsened considerably in the run-up to Taiwan's most recent presidential election. His analysis of Taiwan's politics nonetheless remains relevant, and his discussion of the results and implications of the 2001 legislative elections is quite thorough.

emphasis on human rights concerns (see pp. 39-41). The Taiwan Strait, in short, remains a dangerous potential flashpoint despite strong incentives in both Beijing and Washington to stabilize the Taiwan issue, and both books reviewed in this essay will prove useful to anyone desiring a deeper understanding of this issue.