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TAIWAN-US-CHINA RELATIONS AFTER THE 2004 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN THE UNITED STATES [1]

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Since the Taiwanese presidential elections on March 20, 2004, the United States (US) has reiterated several times that it will continue to respect the 'Six Assurances' originally made to Taiwan in 1982. They have also reiterated that the United States believes that cross-Strait talks should be resumed without any preconditions, that it disapproves of the threat of using military force against Taiwan in China's 'May 17 Statement', and that it approves of the constructiveness of the two speeches President Chen Shui-bian delivered on his second inauguration and on Double Ten National Day. It also emphasized that the United States is ready to help defend Taiwan in the event of a cross-Strait conflict. These recent developments seem to signal that mutual trust between Taiwan and the United States is back to levels seen before the storm over calls to redraft the Constitution of the Republic of China (ROC) through referendum erupted.

However, during an official visit to China just one week before the US presidential elections in November 2004, US Secretary of State Colin Powell stated in an press interview that the United States and China both looked forward to the 'peaceful unification' of China and Taiwan, and that Taiwan was not a sovereign country. Thus, without the slightest warning, Colin Powell changed the general framework of a twenty-year-old Taiwan policy in one fail swoop (the policy maintains that the United States does not suppose to predict the outcome of cross-Strait relations, nor discuss issues of Taiwanese sovereignty).

Were Powell's words a sign that US foreign policy is doomed to take a major shift towards China after the US presidential elections? Or was it purely a slip of the tongue? This article contends that the United States policy framework toward the Taiwan Strait has not been

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changed, although the United States tries to make compensations whenever China or Taiwan do or say anything to upset the cross-Strait balance.

Immediately after Powell's speech, the Director of the Taipei Branch of the American Institute in Taiwan, Director Douglas H. Paal, tried to clarify the facts. It turned out that US policy towards Taiwan had, in fact, not changed, and the US State Department promptly replaced the phrase 'peaceful unification' with 'peaceful resolution'. The United States also highlighted the fact that Powell had made many supportive remarks about Taiwan during his talks with Chinese officials. For example, he discussed issues regarding Taiwan's participation in the World Health Organization and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, and also those regarding US arms sales to Taiwan. It also expressed that Powell urged China to take President Chen Shui-bian's Double Ten National Day speech seriously, and to resume dialogue with Taiwan as soon as possible. If US cross-Strait policy is set to lean towards China, then why would the United States take the trouble to intercede on behalf of Taiwan during talks with China?

On October 26, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, Randy Schriver, also reiterated to David Li Ta-wei, the ROC Representative to the United States, that the United States hoped that the cross-Strait dispute could reach a 'peaceful resolution', that the 'Six Assurances' had not changed, i.e., the US position on Taiwanese sovereignty also remained the same.

The United States has never stated that Taiwan is a sovereign country, and it does not support Taiwanese independence. When Powell said that Taiwan was not a sovereign country, the factor that concerned Taiwan the most was the possibility that the United States would publicly state that Taiwan is part of the People's Republic of China, and thereby change its twenty year old position on Taiwan. The 'Six Assurances' is mainly a method of easing Taiwan's worries. On October 27, the US State Department issued a statement clarifying the fact that US cross-Strait policy promotes cross-Strait dialogue, so that a 'peaceful resolution' can be reached. It emphasized that US policy on this matter remained unchanged. Additionally, in a TV interview with CNBC on his return to the United States, Powell used the term 'peaceful resolution' to describe the US position on the Taiwan Strait issues. The term 'peaceful unification' was not used again.

When President Chen Shui-bian outlined ten instructions (such as calling for cross-Strait talks to be resumed) in a speech on November 10 at the meeting of the National Security Council, the US State Department immediately welcomed its constructive and positive content. The United States proceeded to urge China and Taiwan to take the opportunity to open talks and find a peaceful resolution to the cross-Strait dispute. The US State Department then reiterated the fact that US cross-Strait policy remained unchanged, including the fact that the United States opposes moves in China or Taiwan to unilaterally change the *status quo*, that it does not support Taiwanese independence, that cross-Strait conflict should be peacefully resolved through bilateral negotiations, that neither side should use military force (nor the threat of force) against the other, and that any 'peaceful resolution' proposed must be able to be accepted by the people of both sides of the Strait. And, once again, the US State Department reiterated the 'Six Assurances'.

Up until the middle of 2004, both the government and people of China were suspicious about the increasing 'emptiness' of the US's 'one-China policy'. On the other hand, following an official visit to the United States, senior Taiwanese officials were optimistic about the situation of Taiwan-US relations. From the middle of 2004 up until the end of October, there

have not been any changes in the international environment or cross-Strait relations that would have compelled the United States to modify its Taiwan policy.

Furthermore, it did not seem that Powell's speech signaled any major changes in US policy for, when Powell visited China prior to the US presidential election, he clearly stated that he would resign as US Secretary of State, even if Bush were reelected. How could a Secretary of State just about to resign announce a major shift in US policy (that has not changed for twenty years), and risk subsequent criticism by the Democrats during the presidential election campaigns?

Powell would by no means be the first major US government official to make a mistake when speaking on cross-Strait issues. For example, in April 2002 President Bush referred to Taiwan as the 'Republic of Taiwan' during a speech in the State Department and went on to refer to Taiwan and China as two individual countries. After the incident, the full text of the speech was publicly posted on the Internet and the United States never publicly clarified the facts of the matter. Could this be taken as a sign of how US cross-Strait policy is set to develop? Of course, at present, US cross-Strait policy continues to remain unchanged and the United States does not recognize the 'Republic of Taiwan'.

It is possible to judge changes in US policy by using three indicators. The first is by considering the nature of the occasion (i.e., whether it is an official statement or a response to impromptu questions). The second is by considering the coordination of other bodies (such as whether consultations have already taken place with relevant countries or departments). The third is examining developments following the event. The United States has used many ways to assure Taiwan that US cross-Strait policy and the 'Six Assurances' both remain unchanged. It has also spoken favorably of Taiwan's cross-Strait policy, tried to communicate with China on Taiwan's behalf, and expressed hope that cross-Strait negotiations can be resumed without any preconditions.

It, therefore, seems that the contested points of Powell's speech were indeed most probably mistakes, and that US cross-Strait policy has not changed. Taiwan's worries over this matter are centered on the fact that Taiwan feels that it is the 'weak party' in Taiwan-US-China relations, and risks being sold out by the United States. Although the US policy remains unchanged, it does not mean that Taiwan-US relations are unproblematic. Below, we shall look at the US 'Taiwan Strait strategy and tactics' in more detail.

Since President Bush came to power, the US cross-Strait policy has fundamentally remained the same. That is: the one-China policy, the view that cross-Strait issues must be resolved peacefully by bilateral negotiations, and that neither side should threaten harming cross-Strait peace by provoking the other. As for the latter, Bush has two principles: he opposes China using military force against Taiwan, and he does not support Taiwanese independence. In order to scare China away from employing military force against Taiwan, Bush emphasizes that the United States has promised to help Taiwan defend itself if China ever attacks Taiwan. Similarly, in order to maintain peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, the United States does not want Taiwan to become a legally independent country.

Under this framework, the United States tries to make compensations whenever China or Taiwan do or say anything to upset the cross-Strait balance. For example, when China tries to threaten Taiwan with military action, the United States sells more weapons to Taiwan, in order to remind China that the United States is ready to help Taiwan defend itself and cooperate in its military affairs. If Taiwan makes moves towards legal independence, the United States will,

likewise, need to find a way of deterring Taiwan. Up until the present day, China's deployment of an array missiles aimed at Taiwan is a major concern of the US military, and is the main reason behind the increase in arms sales to Taiwan.

The possibility that a cross-Strait conflict could be caused if Taiwan makes moves towards legal independence via constitutional redrafting is a pressing concern for the United States. For instance, on December 9, 2003, in the press conference with Chinese premier Wen Jiabao, President Bush asserted, "We oppose any unilateral decision by either China or Taiwan to change the status quo. And the comments and actions made by the leader of Taiwan indicate that he may be willing to make decisions unilaterally to change the status quo, which we oppose." Obviously, President Bush's comments directed at President Chen's plan of constitutional reforms. Therefore, the issue of constitutional redrafting by the end of 2006 will continue to be a cause of concern for America, and Taiwan will need to explain itself and make certain guarantees to the United States.

In order to prevent the beginnings of a cross-Strait arms race or a cross-Strait conflict being sparked off by Taiwan's moves to redraft the ROC Constitution, the United States will focus on urging China and Taiwan to open cross-Strait talks, as well as continuing to deter both countries from making 'dangerous' moves. As China and Taiwan both depend quite considerably on the United States, they will have to face US pressure on the subject of reopening cross-Strait negotiations. Taiwan and China will both be focusing on how they can persuade the United States to support their 'cause' and suppress the opposite shore. They will also try hard to show the United States that they are maintaining the *status quo* whilst the opposite shore is threatening it, so that the US pressure can be diverted to the opposite shore.

As long as any amendments to the Taiwanese constitution do not touch upon the subject of Taiwanese sovereignty, China will face considerable pressure from the United States to open cross-Strait dialogue, as China was first to set out preconditions for cross-Strait talks. Nonetheless, China has an impressive record of resisting pressure from the United States and therefore Taiwan will not be able to rely on the United States to help break through the current cross-Strait stalemate as it had been hoping. Additionally, during the Clinton era, the more that the United States pressed both sides for talks, the more unfavorable cross-Strait relations became for Taiwan. Taiwan's confidence in talking to China is likely to diminish, and it will therefore be more likely make unilateral announcements on ideas such as the 'State-to-State Theory'. It is unlikely that cross-Strait relations will resume under pressure from the United States. Rather, to resume bilateral dialogues, China and Taiwan should start discussing ways of making reciprocal compromises or working together on functional or economical issues.