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Taiwan elections: US must show respect for self-determination

As Taiwan presidential elections approach Jan. 14, the US has shown a preference for incumbent Ma Ying-jeou – who says he can work with China. The US should set aside wishful thinking about unification and respect the right of Taiwanese to decide their own future.

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The Taiwan question is an issue that almost everyone – except the 23 million people in Taiwan – wishes would go away.

US officials generally hope that natural economic forces will pull Taiwan and China inextricably together, and that the current government in Taipei will engineer a deal with China that finally answers the question of two countries, or one unified China.

It is not that simple on either side of the Taiwan Strait. There is no evidence that the Taiwanese people want to unify with China, nor that the Chinese will compromise on their position that unification is the only acceptable outcome. The United States should set aside wishful thinking and face that reality with policies that respect the right of Taiwanese to decide their own future.

As Taiwan prepares for presidential elections Jan. 14, the Obama administration, like its predecessors, has shown preference for the candidate of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) – incumbent Ma Ying-jeou – who has cast himself as the man who can work best with China.

When challenger Tsai Ing-wen, candidate of the pro-Taiwan Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), visited Washington in October, a senior administration official told *The Financial Times* that she “left us with distinct doubts about whether she is both willing and able to continue the stability in cross-Strait relations.” A denial of that tilt has been unconvincing.

The elections in Taiwan, like the country’s future writ large, are for the Taiwanese to determine. The US should be prepared to accept the outcome of any transparent, inclusive, democratic process – whether that be formalization of Taiwan’s de facto independence from China, unification, or some

commonwealth arrangement such as the one that Canada – an independent nation – has with the United Kingdom.

The fact is, however, that most Taiwanese are prepared to live with the status quo – full but undeclared independence. What riles them is their continued national humiliation.

Their history is different from that of the “mainlander” Chinese who moved to Taiwan after World War II and today still represent only 10 to 15 percent of the population. Over the centuries, the Taiwanese have been ruled by the Dutch, Spanish, French, the Qing Dynasty of China, the Japanese, and – after the Cairo Declaration assigned Taiwan to China during the war – the KMT party.

Not until 1987, when martial law was lifted, could the Taiwanese even begin to engage in the basic activities of democracy and self-determination.

We have followed Taiwan since the 1960s, having lived there for 15 years between us, ridden the trains and buses, and pedaled bicycles around the country, albeit years apart.

The Taiwanese nation that we have witnessed is a dramatic example of economic, political, and social evolution. Its people have built the quintessential “economic miracle.” As successes mounted, they jettisoned the Nationalists’ statist economic model, which fed inefficiency and corruption, in favor of a vibrant, increasingly socially responsible one.

In politics, the Taiwanese feel that, in addition to building a democratic culture, they have worked hard to coexist with the Chinese among them and across the Taiwan Strait. Except in isolated incidents in the aftermath of the “2-28 Massacre” in 1947, in which thousands of Taiwanese died, the mainlanders have never been attacked or even harassed. The Taiwanese have voted for mainlanders, including President Ma, when they campaigned on pro-Taiwan platforms.

This is the pattern for Taiwanese – humiliation to which they respond with patience. In a remote hamlet of eastern Taiwan in 1968 with no inns, a Taiwanese family offered an American cyclist a bed for the night, but the police said the foreigner had to leave – until a mainlander next door volunteered to take him in. The Taiwanese family was deeply embarrassed, but they gracefully gave way to the mainlanders.

Taiwanese children punished for speaking their native tongues in school have over time accepted Chinese as the official national language. When the deadly SARS virus spread to Taiwan from China in 2003, and China blocked Taiwan’s participation in international meetings about it, the humiliation was profound. But Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian channeled all energy into overcoming the crisis.

The cultural symbols of the Taiwanese remain the yam and the water buffalo – not the Chinese dragon or Japanese rising sun. The people of Taiwan are not out to make the world in their image, but simply ask the world to let them be themselves in peace and freedom.

This national character translates into cautious policies. Even Taiwanese who dream of recognized independence settle for the status quo. Then-President Chen, a Taiwanese whom Beijing and Washington cast as a troublemaker in cross-strait ties, was actually very cautious.

During his presidency, car license plates still had the words “Taiwan Province” – preserving the myth that the island is a province of China. Such timidity also explains why Taiwan’s official name remains “Republic of China” and its biggest airline is “China Airlines.” The Taiwanese have not upset the apple cart; they’ve actually filled it with more red apples.

The Taiwanese are perplexed and frustrated that America finds fault even with their cautious policies. They have heeded Washington’s every prescription – becoming a democracy with a modern economy and admirable social indicators. They have signaled a desire for the status quo and avoided provocations.

They listen to US rhetoric about democracy and watch the United States spend untold billions and sacrifice thousands of US servicemen’s lives to “bring democracy” to far-flung corners of the world.

Yet they sense that, for economic and political convenience, the US takes actions that subtly push them into subordination under a Chinese regime with a dismal human rights record and dodgy concepts of rule of law.

They see the US favor the party in Taiwan that, ironically, used to base its legitimacy on vehement anti-communism and implacable opposition to Beijing but now wants to cut a deal with China – at their expense. The Taiwanese were not party to the KMT’s civil war with the communists, and so should not be sacrificed as part of its solution.

US failure to approve weapons sales commensurate with Taiwan’s defense needs hurts, of course. But the Taiwanese do not want to be America’s thorn in China’s side, a pawn in a geostrategic chess game. What they want is much simpler: respect and dignity; recognition for who they are and what they have achieved; and inclusion in the international community they have worked so hard to merit joining.

The debate on the China-Taiwan issue is unbalanced; almost no US political, business, or social leaders stand up for the noble Taiwanese little guy. A recent proposal, published in The New York Times, suggested that the US negotiate secretly with China to write off the \$1.14 trillion of American debt that China holds in exchange for an end to American military sales to Taiwan and the current US-Taiwan defense arrangement.

The Taiwanese deserve better, and so do the hundreds of millions around the world struggling for exactly the kind of democratic, free-enterprise, good-citizen values that Taiwan embodies.

If America is going to sell out these good, moderate people, at least it should look them in the eyes when it does that, rather than pretend they and their aspirations do not exist.

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