

Opinion

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US Still Needs to Fight for Taiwan's Hearts and Minds

Loose talk about blowing up chip factories and turning weekend warriors into insurgents only feeds brewing suspicion of Washington on the island.



Tsai is in Beijing's cross-hairs. *Photographer: Annabelle Chih/Getty Images*

By Nisid Hajari

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The US has plenty of reasons to defend Taiwan – its strategic position, its critical place in the semiconductor supply chain, the impact not doing so would have on allies in the region. The island's

vibrant democracy counts as another. Over the next few months, though, Taiwan's raucous domestic politics are going to be as much of a challenge for the US as an inspiration.

Two high-profile trips now under way highlight Washington's dilemma. President Tsai Ing-wen is stopping in New York briefly on her way to visit Guatemala and Belize, two of Taiwan's few remaining diplomatic allies. More dramatically, she's expected to meet Republican House Speaker Kevin McCarthy in California next week on her way home, highlighting how tight relations with the US have grown under her administration. China has vowed to retaliate.

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Meanwhile, Tsai's predecessor, former President Ma Ying-jeou, will continue a "personal" visit to mainland China – the first by any Taiwanese leader since Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists fled in 1949. Ma left office in 2016 and is the last president from the Nationalists' Kuomintang party. He says he's aiming to pay respects to his ancestors, underscoring Beijing's argument that people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait belong to one nation historically, culturally and, in its eyes, politically. While Ma isn't scheduled to meet any top Chinese officials, that could change.

The split-screen journeys are a reminder of how deeply divided Taiwan remains politically, with elections to replace Tsai due next January. As US voters know from painful experience, those partisan passions will only grow as the polls draw nearer. Vice President Lai Ching-te, the presumptive nominee of Tsai's Democratic Progressive Party, will no doubt emphasize his party's defiance of China's calls for unification. (Tsai herself cannot run due to term limits.)

On the other hand, KMT leaders (who have not yet decided on their nominee) will argue theirs is the only party capable of lowering cross-strait tensions and dealing with Beijing directly. China will castigate the DPP and likely seek to burnish the KMT's credentials, as it did by lowering some trade and travel barriers after other visits by KMT officials in recent months.

All this means that, in addition to worrying about how China reads its every action relating to Taiwan, the US needs to pay more attention to how Taiwanese voters do.

The level of mistrust of the US evident on a recent visit to the island would surprise many Americans, accustomed to thinking that Taiwanese are (and should be) grateful for US efforts to deter a Chinese attack. What might seem like wild or impractical conspiracy theories – that Washington’s planned subsidies to revive domestic US semiconductor production are aimed at hiring away Taiwan’s best engineers and “hollowing out” its world-beating chip industry, or that US defense strategists hope to provoke a war over Taiwan to isolate China and cripple the People’s Liberation Army – have gained noticeable traction, especially among KMT supporters.

Media companies linked to pro-Beijing tycoons have helped spread such rumors, of course, as have mainland propaganda outlets. But statements by figures in the US, including former officials talking about blowing up Taiwanese chip factories so they don’t fall into Chinese hands, have provided grist for their efforts. As America’s own presidential campaign ramps up, there’s sure to be plenty more irresponsible talk upon which propagandists can seize.

While Taiwanese politicians also need to be careful – in particular, the KMT’s efforts to showcase its ties to Beijing risk alienating a Congress seized by the perceived Chinese threat – US leaders would be wise to watch their words in coming months. Diplomats on the island can work with nimble local fact-checkers to debunk misinformation quickly. But simple tweaks to how US officials back home talk about supply chains – for instance, emphasizing that subsidies to manufacture in America are an opportunity for Taiwanese chip companies to diversify their operations, not an attempt to undercut those firms – might also help quell some suspicions.

Furthermore, while Taiwan does arguably need to move faster to retool its military to fend off a potential Chinese invasion, the US should not overlearn the lessons of the Ukraine war. Pressuring Taiwanese leaders to swiftly transform part-time reserves into a deadly insurgent force comes across as clueless and arrogant. Far-reaching reforms will demand patience, and stronger buy-in from Taiwanese commanders and citizens.



The US should keep communication channels open to the KMT as well as the government; it’s a good sign that Terry Gou, the billionaire founder of Foxconn Technology Group and a leading contender for the party’s nomination, is himself visiting the US right now. Above all, though, the US should itself try to improve dialogue with China. One thing Taiwanese can agree on is that a war would be disastrous. More visible US efforts to prevent one would surely be welcomed.

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