

Cover Story

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# Dear Joe

## What Asia Seeks from the New US President

While changes in US presidents are always major affairs for countries around the world, the advent of the Joe Biden administration is especially momentous. It puts an end to the deeply disruptive presidency of Donald Trump and spells an opportunity for a return to normalcy. But what does Asia seek from the new US administration? We asked a host of leading scholars.

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# What Does Taiwan Want? It Wants to Be Taiwan

By Margaret K. Lewis



**Despite its history as a target for the ire of Beijing and legacy of harsh martial rule following its occupation starting in the late 1940s by nationalist Chinese forces, Taiwan is an undeniable success story. Its democracy is robust, its economy is the envy of many nations and, most recently, its handling of the pandemic has been an example for the world.**

**Yet it remains under threat from its huge neighbor and needs the protection offered by the United States. Margaret Lewis writes that Taipei hopes that the closer ties built during the Trump presidency will continue under the new Biden administration.**

WHEN ASKED to write on what Taiwan seeks from the new US administration, my immediate response was simple: Taiwan wants to be Taiwan, and it seeks US support for that goal. But as anyone who is familiar with Taiwan knows, nothing is that simple. Writing this from Taipei, the Taiwan I see around me consists of nearly 24 million people living under a democratically elected government. It looks, acts and feels like other countries in which I have lived. Yet the meaning of “Taiwan” remains contested.

Several years ago, when applying for a visa to the People’s Republic of China (PRC), my brow furrowed when I hit the question, “Country or territory where the applicant is located when applying for this visa.” I knew exactly where I was located: I was sitting at my kitchen table in Taipei. I also knew that writing the country “Republic of China (Taiwan)” would not be received warmly. I refused to write the desired response, “Taiwan province,” in line with the PRC’s One China Principle. I settled for simply writing “Taiwan” — as all agree that I was on an island of that name — and hoped for the best. I received the visa, though I am skeptical whether “Taiwan” alone would satisfy PRC authorities today given the chillier cross-strait climate.

“Taiwan,” depending on the speaker and context, is variously referred to as an island (sometimes a “self-governing” one), economy, jurisdiction, area, province or country. If using the word “Taiwan” could be construed to mean that it is recognized by the international community as a country under that name, then “Chinese Taipei” or the mouthful that is “Separate Customs

Territory of Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen and Matsu [Chinese Taipei]” have been called into service. The PRC government permitted observer status in the World Health Assembly from 2009 to 2016 under the name “Chinese Taipei” but refused to even tolerate this milquetoast label once the shift from a Kuomintang (KMT) to a Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) administration occurred.

To be clear, Tsai Ing-wen is the president of the Republic of China (Taiwan): She stands in front of the flag of the Republic of China (abbreviated as ROC) and celebrates as a national holiday Oct. 10, the day in 1911 when the Wuchang Uprising began that led to the end of the Qing dynasty and the founding of the ROC. The (Taiwan) in parentheses is, however, increasingly prominent. The ROC is an historical anchor, the symbols of which have gradually shed much — though not all — of their baggage left over from the martial-law era that began with the occupation of the island by the KMT following World War II and formally ended in 1987.

And while there are some citizens of ROC (Taiwan) who may want the ROC to regain its former prominence, the long-term trend has been toward an increasing Taiwanese identity, with those expressing a dual Taiwanese-Chinese identity diminishing and a pure Chinese identity constituting just a sliver of the population. A confluence of factors, from concern about the PRC leadership’s enhanced repression (in the mainland and in Hong Kong) to pride in Taiwan’s phenomenal handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, have boosted Taiwanese identity to previously unseen heights.

All of this underlies the name “Taiwan.” I am neither an ROC national nor someone who identifies as Taiwanese based on family ties. I have spent considerable time living in and studying Taiwan, but I am nonetheless cognizant that I am an outsider. I am not truly part of Taiwan, and

writing what people who call this place their home may “seek” requires humility. But when I participate in a meeting on reforms to the legal system, or attend one of the common public protests, or even take the dog for a walk in the park, I am reminded that what people around me want is to keep exercising their right to self-determination: to enjoy their hard-won freedoms and to make choices about the direction their collective lives will take in the future.

There is debate regarding under what name that future should be. The shorthand term “pro-independence” is commonly understood as referring to people who want to declare Taiwan’s existence as Taiwan alone and drop the ROC. I worry that people less versed in the terminology see pro-independence as implying Taiwan is somehow currently under the thumb of an outside oppressor. The PRC has never controlled Taiwan, though its looming presence is a constant factor in Taiwan’s choices. This month, during the annual “two sessions” political meetings in Beijing, the PRC leadership reiterated that there is absolutely no wiggle room on the position that Taiwan is part of the PRC. Concerns about how and when the PRC might shift this rhetoric to reality are well grounded. The US is vital for Taiwan to remain Taiwan without the added “province” language demanded by Beijing.

## TAIWAN NEEDS US SUPPORT

Taiwan cannot maintain its existence free from Beijing’s control without US support, and it is in Washington’s interest to maintain Taiwan as a democratic society. I would no doubt get a range of answers from a person-in-the-street poll about what exactly that US support should entail. But there are three themes to the US-Taiwan relationship that I expect would emerge and that are reflected in the Tsai administration’s messaging: defense, trade and international space.

<sup>1</sup> “PRC Military Pressure Against Taiwan Threatens Regional Peace and Stability,” US Department of State press release, Jan. 23, 2021, at [www.state.gov/prc-military-pressure-against-taiwan-threatens-regional-peace-and-stability/](http://www.state.gov/prc-military-pressure-against-taiwan-threatens-regional-peace-and-stability/)

<sup>2</sup> “Global democracy has a very bad year,” *The Economist*, Feb. 2, 2021, at [www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2021/02/02/global-democracy-has-a-very-bad-year](http://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2021/02/02/global-democracy-has-a-very-bad-year)

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#### DEFENSE

Defending Taiwan is good for Taiwan and good for the US. As a legal scholar, I get somewhat varied responses when I ask defense specialists the highly untechnical question, “How bad would it be for the US if Beijing controlled Taiwan?” But the answers all underscore that it would, indeed, be bad. Taiwan’s position in the first island chain makes it of great strategic importance to US interests in the Indo-Pacific, as well as to the security of Japan and other American friends and allies in the region.

The 1979 Taiwan Relations Act authorized the US to provide “arms of a defensive character” and laid the foundation for sales that, while they waxed and waned over the years, gained momentum during the Trump administration. The Biden administration affirmed in its first week that the US “commitment to Taiwan is rock-solid.”<sup>1</sup> This vocal support, alongside the invitation to the inauguration of de facto Taiwan

ambassador to the US Bi-khim Hsiao, generated a collective sigh of relief in Taiwan.

As the Biden administration progresses, I fully expect that Taiwan will continue to seek defense assistance in terms of hardware and training. President Tsai has also emphasized strengthening domestic efforts to improve defense capabilities. It will not be easy for her to build the personnel, equipment, and public support for a strategy that focuses on increasing the costs to the PRC of military conflict — an approach that I have heard explained with reference to hedgehogs, porcupines and turtles (animals that all have defensive coverings but are not outwardly fierce). US support alone cannot turn Taiwan into a hedgehog. Assistance must be accompanied by enhanced domestic efforts.

Alongside questions about the scale and type of defense assistance that Taiwan seeks from the US, there are questions about the overall nature of US support. Asking whether the decades-old

policy of “strategic ambiguity” is still adequate for deterrence purposes is a valid inquiry. That said, even exploring what, if any, adjustments might be made should be done with tremendous care that external messaging is not prematurely interpreted as an actual change in this bedrock US policy.

Moreover, especially with US-PRC relations expected to remain tense, the tendency, particularly by some members of Congress, to talk of Taiwan in terms of a contrast to *communist* China should be dialed back. Of course, US defense support is there to help Taiwan protect itself from the Chinese Communist Party-ruled PRC, but using a communist “threat” is needlessly inflammatory and depicts Taiwan as a pawn in US-PRC dynamics rather than as an actor with agency.

#### TRADE

Taiwan is the US’s ninth-largest trading partner and plays a crucial role in global supply chains. Most prominently, the US’s need for semiconductors and the push to avoid reliance on PRC-based sources have underscored the importance of the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC), which not only supplies high-quality Taiwan-produced chips but has also committed to building production capacity in the US.

Taiwan seeks to update the existing bilateral trade framework with an arrangement akin to a free-trade agreement (FTA), even if it is modified to fit the unofficial nature of the US-Taiwan relationship. Concluding an FTA will not be easy, in part because we await clarity on the Biden administration’s overall appetite for pushing free trade and, even if that is tepid, whether progress on trade with Taiwan can nonetheless occur alongside more hesitant engagement in a broader multilateral context. Tsai has her own domestic challenges, most visibly that US-sourced beef and pork are contentious because of both health concerns and local producers’ economic interests.

An FTA is the clearest way to give a shot of adrenaline to the economic relationship, but it is not the only way. In November 2020, the Trump administration signed a memorandum of understanding for a “US-Taiwan Economic Prosperity Dialogue,” which provides a mechanism to explore ways to deepen the US-Taiwan economic relationship. It is too early to know how meaningful this dialogue will be under President Biden.

#### INTERNATIONAL SPACE

The US is a great friend of Taiwan, but Taiwan needs more friends. The Tsai administration has worked to expand Taiwan’s network of friendly relations even as the PRC has further depleted Taiwan’s formal diplomatic allies. The Biden administration’s commitment to multilateralism presents opportunities to shore up Taiwan’s participation in the limited international fora in which it currently participates as well as support Taiwan in its quest to expand connections with other countries. Advocating for Taiwan to regain its observer status at the World Health Assembly is a clear place to start, not only because it recently held this status for eight years but also because Taiwan’s skillful handling of the pandemic highlights how it can contribute to the global conversation on public health.

In addition to working with existing international bodies, the US can also support Taiwan in finding innovative ways to develop international ties. The Global Co-operation Training Framework (GCTF), for example, started as a low-key bilateral mechanism before expanding two years ago to include Japan as an official partner. Other countries have participated in specific trainings, with potential for greater in-person multilateral GCTF activities once the pandemic abates.

Looking ahead, the Biden administration has discussed convening a “Summit for Democracy” and, more generally, has placed democracy and

human rights prominently on its agenda. Taiwan has earned a seat at the table at any gathering of democracies. Its first direct presidential election was only 25 years ago, yet, according to *The Economist*, my family moved from a “flawed democracy” to a “full democracy” when we relocated from the US to Taiwan last summer.<sup>2</sup> Its transformation from an authoritarian to a democratic government is stunning, and it’s all the more worthy of celebration as democracy has recently taken hits in a number of countries, including the US.

In addition, as I write, the leaders of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue — the US, Japan, India and Australia — are prepping for a virtual summit. This raises questions about whether the Quad will become increasingly formalized and perhaps expand beyond core security questions. A “Quint” with Taiwan is not in the realm of reality, but might there be potential for a Quad-plus arrangement that brings in Taiwan, New Zealand and other like-minded countries in the region for various levels of engagement in a new multilateral gathering?

While the Quad could well prove to be an ill-fitting vehicle for engaging Taiwan, the point is that the more the PRC blocks Taiwan from international engagements, the more there is the need for creative thinking about how to find new spaces. As a parent, I’m reminded of the classic story “Harold and the Purple Crayon” in which a boy nimbly navigates by drawing a boat when he’s flung in the ocean, a picnic when he’s hungry and a hot-air balloon when he needs a broader view. Taiwan’s resources pale in comparison to the PRC’s, yet its resourcefulness in using what it does have to persevere and thrive is admirable.

have been made to have a louder 10, but there is something more satisfying about it actually surpassing the norm and hitting 11. The long-described “robust unofficial” US-Taiwan relationship hit new heights under Trump, and that energy is carrying over under Biden. Could the US-Taiwan relationship go to 11?

Taiwan policy has been one of the rare areas of continuity between the Trump and Biden administrations. Taiwan has rightly been pleased. But questions remain, such as how loose ends from the Trump administration will be woven into the Biden administration’s policies. Notably, the Trump administration’s nullification of longstanding “contact guidelines” has paved the way for the Biden administration to re-evaluate the extent to which the “unofficial” relationship should further incorporate trappings of formality. The Biden administration could nudge the dial toward 11, though I expect a more cautious approach short of blowing out the metaphorical speakers.

The strong communication between Taipei and Washington bodes well for the two sides to find a sweet spot that is even stronger without creating damaging noise — though there is always some uncertainty as to how Beijing will react to any adjustments in the dial. I hope that in four, eight, twelve years and beyond we are still asking what Taiwan seeks after each US presidential election. Having this remain a quadrennial question would mean that Taiwan has the agency to chart its own future as Taiwan. Ultimately, it would be glorious if Taiwan reached a point where it could turn the dial past 11 and not have to worry about the neighbor complaining.

#### ‘THESE GO TO 11’

In the classic mockumentary *This is Spinal Tap*, the guitarist proudly displays an amplifier with dials marked from 1 to 11: the amp could just

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