

I've been in Taiwan this week with a small delegation sponsored by the estimable [Project 2049](#). Our visit comes at what would appear to be an auspicious time in cross-strait relations, as Taiwan and mainland China have made concrete steps over the past two years to reduce tensions and improve their economic and transportation ties, along with increasing political dialogue through multiple channels. But complacency is not in order. I have heard numerous concerns expressed this week about the fragility of the current equilibrium. In particular, both Taiwan and China face political transition points next year that could also exacerbate cross-strait tensions. And many Taiwanese feel uncertain of the White House's commitment to Taiwan's security -- an uncertainty that could possibly undermine their confidence in continuing to improve their relationship with China. Maintaining a security equilibrium takes regular tending and frequent calibration. The Obama administration should consider taking steps now to preserve the current stability, as well as preparing contingency plans for possible disruptions in the next year.

Early next year (the precise date is not yet set) Taiwan will hold a presidential election. The current president, Ma Ying-jeou of the KMT party, has thus far enjoyed a more agreeable posture from China, in part because Beijing finds President Ma vastly preferable to his reckless predecessor Chen Shui-bian of the more independence-minded DPP. If Ma wins reelection to a second term next year, however, Beijing might be tempted to up the ante and demand more concessions from the lame-duck president. Conversely, if the DPP nominee (who is yet to be determined) defeats Ma, Beijing might throw a brush-back pitch to test the new president -- even though the leading DPP contenders all appear to be more responsible and sober-minded than the comparatively erratic Chen. As a further complication, China will undergo its own leadership transition later in 2012, as the next Communist Party Congress [appears](#) on track to select Xi Jinping as the successor to Hu Jintao. Reading the tea leaves from Beijing is as murky as the Kremlinology of yore. But it is not unlikely that factions within the Chinese government -- such as the growingly assertive People's Liberation Army -- might use the leadership transition as a time to assert their own power through increased provocations toward Taiwan.

Ironically, as much as China treats U.S. arms sales to Taiwan as a persistent irritant, it is precisely this U.S. support for Taiwan's defense needs that has given Taiwan the confidence to improve relations with Beijing. Yet China's ongoing military build-up across the strait and other diplomatic pressures on Taiwan threatens this détente. Meanwhile, Taiwan feels increasingly isolated and insecure about its support from the United States. Here there are several potential steps that the Obama administration, and other U.S. leaders, can take to help preserve the prevailing equilibrium. These include:

Taiwan still matters

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The Obama administration should agree to Taiwan's requests to buy F-16 C/D fighter jets and diesel submarines. China will protest loudly in the short-term, but in the long-term these defensive weapons systems will improve Taiwan's security and thus its confidence in continuing to improve cross-strait conditions;

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The Obama administration should send a senior official to visit Taiwan; perhaps someone like U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk to discuss improving regional trade architecture, or Energy Secretary Steven Chu to consult on nuclear energy safety in light of the ongoing tragedy in Japan;

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The Obama administration should increase its support for Taiwan's participation in international organizations, particularly in areas where Taiwan's capabilities match global needs, such as the International Atomic Energy Association;

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Members of Congress from both parties and both houses should increase their visits to Taiwan (and staff delegations as well). Support for Taiwan has dwindled in Congress, as have the frequency of congressional trips;

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American governors should also be visiting Taiwan, the United States' 10th-largest [trading partner](#). Especially governors who are considering running for president and want to improve their foreign policy experience.

Ultimately the Taiwan question is about more than just the bilateral U.S.-Taiwan and U.S.-China relationships. It is about the U.S. strategic posture in Asia and the credibility of our commitments. American allies such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia, along with emerging powers such as India, Indonesia, and Vietnam, all watch carefully how the U.S. treats its friends -- particularly fellow democracies like Taiwan. As for the U.S.-China relationship, the

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Obama administration [learned](#) in its first year that unilateral concessions to Beijing are rarely reciprocated, and has wisely shifted course to a more realistic policy toward China that combines cooperation in areas of mutual interest while hedging against Beijing's possible mischief (or worse). In this regard, maintaining a strong U.S.-Taiwan relationship will also be a good thing for the U.S.-China relationship -- even if Beijing doesn't agree.

Source: [Foreign Policy](#)