

Recently, major news media in the US and Europe have been awash with analyses on how the West got China wrong. Prominent publications such as the London-based magazine *The Economist* (“How the West got China wrong,” March 1) argue that since former US president Richard Nixon’s opening to China, the West had hoped that diplomatic and commercial engagement would bring political and economic openness, but that the gamble has failed.

In their seminal article “The China Reckoning” (*Foreign Affairs*, March/April), Kurt Campbell and Ely Ratner, officials who served in the administration of former US president Barack Obama, write: “Nearly half a century since Nixon’s first steps toward rapprochement, the record is increasingly clear that Washington once again put too much faith in its power to shape China’s trajectory.”

Neither carrots nor sticks have swayed China as predicted. China has instead pursued its own course, belying a range of US expectations in the process.

In his *Washington Post* article “We got China wrong, now what?” (Feb. 28), commentator Charles Lane argues that the US needs a long, sober policy rethink, and that it should “reinvest in traditional alliances with democratic nations in the Asia-Pacific region.”

That is where Taiwan comes in: For too long, Taiwan has been a victim of the over-optimism and unwarranted fascination the US and western Europe had with China. In the 1970s it was shunted aside by Nixon and former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger, as it had to make way for the larger “strategic” interests associated with enhancing relations with China.

Little attention was paid to the fact that Taiwan was under authoritarian rule by the Chinese Nationalists of the Kuomintang. Fortunately for the people of Taiwan, the US Congress pushed through the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, which maintained a semblance of unofficial relations.

Then, in the 1980s Taiwan went through its momentous transition to democracy, and in the early 1990s, former president Lee Teng-hui (李登輝) presided over a vibrant democracy.

## West should forget about China, focus on Taiwan

Written by Gerrit van der Wees  
Monday, 12 March 2018 06:55

---

This new situation should have brought about a fundamental shift of Western policy toward Taiwan, but unfortunately it coincided with the economic rise of China: Tempted by the lure of China's market, the West remained stuck "engaging" China at the expense of better relations with Taiwan.

China's new strength brought about a major expansion of its political and military prowess, which it used to push Taiwan further into the corner of diplomatic isolation, while attempting to use economic ties to bring about political rapprochement, particularly during the administration of former president Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT).

However, this approach was rejected by a Taiwanese populace that increasingly treasured its own unique identity, and valued its new-found freedoms and hard-fought democracy: In local elections in 2014 and national elections in 2016, the Taiwanese overwhelmingly voted for the Democratic Progressive Party, culminating in the 2016 election of President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文).

There is a growing sense that Taiwan's international isolation should be a thing of the anachronistic past.

Thus, as this much-needed rethink about policy toward China is ongoing, the US and western Europe have an opportunity to get their policy toward Taiwan right, and invest in strengthening relations with a strategic beacon of democracy in the region.

*Gerrit van der Wees, a former Dutch diplomat, served as editor of Taiwan Communique from 1980 until 2016. He teaches history of Taiwan at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia.*

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2018/03/12](#)