

The future of US-Taiwan relations

Written by Juan Fernando Herrera Ramos
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The US presidential election is to take place on Tuesday, and given the considerable role that the “leader of the free world” plays in geopolitical affairs, it is important to consider the implications for Taiwan of either a re-election for US President Donald Trump or a victory for former US vice president Joe Biden.

Biden has a lead nationally and in most battleground states, but if anything has been learned from the 2016 elections it is that polls do not always get it right, and who will be the president of the US would not be decided until the last vote has been counted.

This election has probably been on the minds of many Taiwanese who wonder whether there will be significant consequences for the nation depending on the outcome of the election. Considering the turbulent relationship between the world’s two biggest economies, there are plenty of reasons to think that there would not be a change, and regardless of who wins the election, the friendship between Taiwan and the US would remain strong.

To start, first look at the candidates’ positions on Taiwan.

On the Democratic side, Biden has said that China is “not competition for” the US. He also made troubling comments in 2001, saying that Taiwan should maintain the “status quo” because the US was “not willing to go to war over [Taiwan’s] unilateral declaration of independence.”

It is important to add that he also said in 2001 that if China tried to take Taiwan by force, the US would “provide the military means in terms of material [support] to prevent that from happening,” but for a former Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman, his foreign policy comments regarding the future relationship between his country and Taiwan have been rather scarce.

On the Republican side, Trump praised Chinese president Xi Jinping (习近平) for his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic before it started spreading throughout the rest of the world, and compared Taiwan to the tip of a Sharpie marker and China to the Oval Office’s Resolute desk.

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He reportedly promised Beijing he would remain silent on the Hong Kong protests to not affect trade negotiations and, according to his former national security adviser, he has expressed approval for the Chinese Communist Party building concentration camps for Uighurs in Xinjiang.

On the positive side, both candidates have shown support for Taiwan through different actions.

Biden was one of the senators who voted to approve the Taiwan Relations Act in 1979, which continues to be the cornerstone of Taiwan-US relations. He addressed President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) by her official title after her re-election at the beginning of this year and called for stronger ties with Taiwan.

He has also described president Xi as a “thug,” accused China of predatory trade practices and labeled the detention of Uighurs as unconscionable.

For his part, Trump might be the most pro-Taiwan president in recent history. Under his administration there have been many positive developments in the relationship between the nations, such as the inauguration of the new American Institute in Taiwan compound in 2018, and the signing of the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act, the Taiwan Travel Act and the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative Act.

The US has also approved a package of arm sales to Taiwan worth billions of US dollars.

There are points to be made for and against both candidates, but regardless of what their personal views and plans might be, there is a single truth that shows that Taiwan-US relations would not drastically change no matter who wins next week: Members of the US Congress from both political parties have long records of staunch support for Taiwan, and there is no reason to believe that it would end after the election.

It is true that Trump has signed the aforementioned acts in support of Taiwan, but it is also true

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that most, if not all, of them were approved in both the US House and Senate by veto-proof majorities. This is the main reason it is hard to believe that either candidate would, or could, prevent any piece of legislation in support of Taiwan from being approved in the eventuality that it was presented to them.

Another aspect to consider is that US-China ties have eroded significantly in the past few years. This is why many current and former Chinese officials have reached the conclusion that the countries are on a collision course regardless of who occupies the White House, and looking at everything that has happened in the past four years, it would be hard to argue against their thinking.

The ongoing US-China trade dispute, the barrage of attacks coming out of the Trump administration blaming the Chinese government for the COVID-19 pandemic, the bipartisan condemnation of China's human rights abuses, the battle for dominance in the development of 5G networks, and the reciprocal ejection of journalists and closing of consulates almost certainly guarantees that the relationship would remain turbulent for years, regardless of who is president.

If Trump wins a second term, the possibility of him rebuilding the bridges he has already burned seems unlikely, and that he has shown absolutely no willingness to do so makes this scenario almost unthinkable.

If Biden becomes president, pressure from the public and the US Congress would make it nearly impossible for him to try to bring things "back to normal" with the Chinese government, and considering that he has strongly criticized its leadership, there is no reason to think that he might even try to do so.

Whatever the outcome of the election, the picture looks much brighter for Taiwan-US ties than it does for the US-China relationship, and with the approval of US pork imports, the possibility of a Taiwan-US trade agreement might be right around the corner.

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