Partisan Intervention and Taiwan’s China Policy

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This article examines the impact of democratization on Taiwan’s foreign policy making. For fifty years, the ruling Kuomintang determined Taiwan’s China policy. The democratization that made possible the election of President Chen Shui-bian, however, complicated foreign policy making by allowing the participation of more voices in Taiwan’s politics. For the past five years, the now opposition KMT and other parties have challenged Chen’s China policy with a vastly different foreign policy agenda. This article examines their views, and the influence of party cleavage on Taiwan’s China policy. It seeks to answer the following questions: In Taiwan, does “politics stop at the water’s edge”? (i.e., is there strong coordination among national officials and politicians), or is the state “disaggregated” with different elements (e.g., political parties) conducting semi-autonomous foreign policies in the service of disparate societal interests?

Key words: cross-Strait relations, party politics, foreign policy, national interest

Taiwan’s political achievements have been remarkable. After decades of authoritarian rule, Taiwan in the mid-1980s began a decade of transition, culminating in full-fledged democracy in
2000. With all of its benefits of government by the people, and protection of freedoms and rights, democracy has also fragmented Taiwan’s political scene. Once dominated by the Nationalists (Kuomintang, or KMT), democratic Taiwan today enjoys strong political debate between two major political party coalitions: the pan-Greens (the Democratic Progressive Party and the Taiwan Solidarity Union) on the left, and the pan-Blues (the KMT and the People’s First Party) on the right. While both camps desire a Taiwan free to determine its own future, they disagree on methods for dealing with China. While political discourse is a democratic virtue, it can inhibit Taiwan’s ability to stand up to China, which is determined to unite the island with the Chinese mainland.

Understanding Taiwan’s political parties and their views on national interest are vital for understanding Taiwan’s China policy. This article examines their views, and the influence of party cleavage on Taiwan’s China policy. It seeks to answer the following questions: In Taiwan, does “politics stop at the water’s edge”? (i.e., is there strong coordination among national officials and politicians), or is the state “disaggregated” with different elements (e.g., political parties) conducting semi-autonomous foreign policies in the service if disparate societal interests? Why did Taiwan attempt to float a referendum on Taiwan independence after years of advocating eventual reunification with mainland China? Why was Taiwan’s KMT able after years of animosity with China’s CCP to take part in cross-Strait talks? Why was Taiwan’s ruling DPP unable to prohibit party-to-party talks?

**Foreign Policy and the National Interest**

The definition of national interest within the state shapes its subsequent foreign policy. The national interest refers to the basic determinants that guide state policy in relation to the external environment. The term originated in sixteenth century Europe and, along with the development of the nation-state and nationalism, began to replace the previous notion of *raison d’etat* (reason of state) as the force behind foreign policy. The concept of the national interest expressed no particular dynastic or state-familial interests but the interests of the society as a