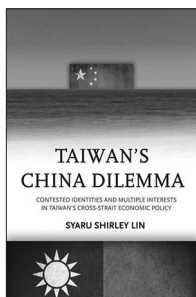


REGIONAL STUDIES

Taiwan's China Dilemma: Contested Identities and Multiple Interests in Taiwan's Cross-Strait Economic Policy

By Syaru Shirley Lin

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The US national security community is accustomed to seeing the word “Taiwan” paired with the term “crisis.” Yet, in recent years, the Taiwan Strait has been remarkably calm and largely absent from the headlines. It has been replaced by media attention on other Asia-Pacific flash points, notably the Korean peninsula, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea. Syaru Shirley Lin’s book contains significant insights enabling readers to understand why the Taiwan Strait has remained largely crisis free for almost a decade.

Continued calm is not assured. Taiwan remains the most likely location for a full-blown military conflict between the United States and the People’s Republic of China, even if the degree of tension and probability of a conflagration have both declined significantly. The main reason for this decline is not that China has given up on its pursuit of national unification with the island; on the contrary, Beijing remains staunchly committed to political union with Taipei. As *Taiwan’s China Dilemma* makes clear, political leaders in China have to date exercised considerable patience and exhibited a good measure of pragmatism and flexibility in pursuing this goal. This pragmatism and flexibility have been matched by political leaders in Taiwan. The result—a remarkable expansion of cross-strait economic relations, transportation links, and people-to-people interactions. The island’s China dilemma refers to the reality of Taiwan “relying economically on a partner it does not trust and that poses an existential threat” (206).

Understanding cross-strait dynamics and focusing on Taiwan requires an examination of multiple factors, and Lin’s book brings these together effectively, showing how economic realities and political aspirations interact. Merely focusing on the burgeoning economic ties increasingly binding Taiwan to China leads to a simplistic conclusion: eventual political union is inevitable. Meanwhile, simply focusing on political trends in Taiwan, such as evolving identities, suggests a more troubled and even turbulent future for the island’s relations with the mainland. Lin examines four case studies of Taiwan’s trade policy toward China and shows how “identity forms the basis for defining interests,” leading the island to alternate between restriction and liberalization (12).

Taiwan’s China Dilemma underscores that while people on the island increasingly identify as Taiwanese and less as Chinese, they also recognize their economic present and future are intertwined inescapably with China. Psychologically, the islanders are very proud of the democratic system they have created and the economic prosperity they have built through ingenuity and hard work. For Washington, Taipei’s persistent Beijing dilemma demands continued US vigilance.

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