Shifting Domestic Politics and Security Policy in Japan and Taiwan: The Search for a Balancing Strategy between China and the US

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This article examines the impact of the changed domestic political environment in Japan and Taiwan in the second half of the 2000s, namely the arrival of administrations with a more moderate China policy, on their respective relations with Beijing and Washington. It seeks to find out the extent to which Japan under the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and Taiwan under the Kuomintang (KMT) may have attempted a policy shift towards accommodation of China at the expense of their respective security ties with America. The article also examines how much impact upon security policy can be traced to the changes in domestic politics in the two cases. The discussion suggests that, irrespective of the altered domestic political situation, the concern that China’s growing military power may adversely affect national interests has largely trumped the political will for seeking accommodation, more so in the Japanese case than in the Taiwanese case. While both Tokyo and Taipei have avoided deferring to Beijing’s interests, each has sought to strike a delicate balance between engaging China and maintaining defense ties with the US.

Introduction

For more than half a century East Asian nations have relied on the US security umbrella and close economic ties with Washington in pursuit of their political, economic and security objectives. These are the cases of Japan and the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan.1 With the shifting regional power balance amid China’s
rise, and especially as the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has become the
driver of the region’s economic dynamism, Asian nations may have started to
reconsider their strategic options.

This article examines the extent to which Japan and Taiwan may have each
attempted a policy shift towards accommodation of Beijing, especially at the
expense of their respective ties with Washington. The discussion seeks to find
out how much impact upon their security policies can be traced to the changed
domestic political environment in the latter half of the 2000s. This includes, in par-
ticular, the arrival of what was initially perceived as generally China-friendly
administrations in Tokyo and Taipei, especially if compared with the previous
governments in both Japan and the ROC. The article thus illustrates how
(altered) domestic factors, specifically leaders’ visions and policy priorities, inter-
act with external settings, namely shifts in relative power balance, in influencing
foreign policy.

The choice of Japan and Taiwan as case studies is warranted for several
reasons. In the first place, both may be regarded “not normal states” that face
certain limitations in conducting their security policies. Japan under the pacifist
Article 9 of its 1947 Constitution has self-imposed constraints on exercising mili-
tary power in the international arena. Taiwan lacks formal international recog-
nition as an independent entity by a large number of states, despite enjoying
domestic Westphalian sovereignty. In both cases, America has played a role in
this “abnormal” situation. Article 9 originated during the US-led occupation of
Japan (1945-1952) following the end of the Pacific War. The commonly accepted
view is that it was “imposed” by America to ensure that Japan would never again
become a military threat to the international community. While the US signed a
defense treaty with the ROC in 1954, it decided in 1971 to support the PRC’s entry
into the UN. This led to the ROC’s expulsion from the organization and hence to
its loss of external sovereignty. Subsequently, America abrogated its security pact
with the ROC and formally recognized the PRC in 1979.

Secondly, both Tokyo and Taipei face a “dualism” dilemma in their security
and foreign economic policies. The US remains the main security guarantor of
both Japan and Taiwan. In the former case, America’s defense obligations stem
from the 1951 US-Japan Security Treaty (revised in 1960). In the latter case,
the US commitment to Taiwanese defense is based on the 1979 Taiwan Relations
Act (TRA), which provides the island with an informal “spoke” in the US-led
security system in East Asia. In the economic area, however, the PRC is the
number one trading partner of both Japan and Taiwan. In 2002, China overtook
the US to become Japan’s largest source of imports, while in 2009 the PRC
became Japan’s largest export destination. China’s share of Japan’s total trade
averaged 20.6% in 2009, in 2010, and in 2011. In 2002, mainland China also sur-
passed the US to become Taiwan’s largest export market and it became the
island’s number one trading partner in 2003. The PRC’s share of Taiwan’s trade in 
2010 and in 2011 averaged 21.5%, while the US share averaged 10.6% during the 
same period.6

Finally, both Japan and Taiwan experienced major changes in their domestic 
politics in the latter half of the 2000s. In Japan, the conservative and pro-US 
Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), after more than 50 years in power, was replaced 
in 2009 by the centrist Democratic Part of Japan (DPJ). Influenced by its anti-US 
and pro-China left-wing factions, as well as by its coalition partner in 2009, the 
Social Democratic Party, the DPJ started off with an emphasis on Asia diplomacy 
and appeared to move closer to Beijing, while neglecting Japan’s ties with 
Washington. In Taiwan, the Chinese Nationalist Party, the Kuomintang (KMT), 
returned to power in 2008 after an eight-year rule of the pro-independence Demo-
cratic Progressive Party (DPP). Right from the start, President Ma Ying-jeou 
(2008-present) focused on reconciliation with the Chinese mainland. This was 
in stark contrast to the rather provocative approach towards the PRC of his DPP 
predecessor, Chen Shui-bian.

This article is divided into two major parts. After examining the DPJ’s major 
policy pledges on foreign and security policy, the first part of the article focuses on 
Japan’s security ties with the PRC and the US, respectively, under the three suc-
cessive democratic administrations of Yukio Hatoyama (2009-2010), Naoto Kan 
(2010-2011) and Yoshihiko Noda (2011-2012). In the second part, the article 
investigates Taiwan’s China policy and its relations with America under the 
KMT. The discussion explores Ma’s core policy principles and his strategy 
towards the mainland, as well as elaborates on the place of the US and Japan in 
the island’s security policy.

Japanese security policy under the DPJ: Relations 
with China and the US

**DPJ policy pledges on foreign and security policy**

Led by the slogan *seiken kōtai* (“change of government”), the DPJ achieved a 
landslide victory in the August 2009 Lower House election. It won 308 seats 
out of total 480 seats, and thereby made a historic change of government by 
putting the LDP in opposition.7

On security issues, the DPJ—while in opposition—generally stressed the cen-
trality of the alliance with Washington in Japan’s diplomacy, regarding it as the 
“linchpin of stability” and a “public good” in the Asia-Pacific region.8 At the 
same time, the party pledged to “build a close and equal” alliance, as well as to 
pursue an “autonomous foreign policy strategy for Japan.”9 The latter raised 
alarm bells in Washington after the DPJ assumed power in 2009, as it was seen
as a major departure from the traditional US-centrism in Tokyo’s foreign policy under the successive LDP-led governments.

What some scholars\textsuperscript{10} regard as another important difference with the LDP is the DPJ’s consistent promotion in its policy platforms of a more Asia-oriented diplomacy for Japan, notably of the idea of an East Asian Community (EAC). While at the level of political rhetoric the DPJ indeed sought to differentiate itself from the LDP’s US-centered foreign policy, Japan’s support for regional cooperation in East Asia could be regarded as an area of continuity from the LDP.\textsuperscript{11} Indeed, back in 2002 Junichiro Koizumi proposed the concept of “act together, advance together” as the basis of a partnership between Japan and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and as a first step towards the creation of an EAC, which he envisaged to include ASEAN + 3, Australia and New Zealand.\textsuperscript{12} Ever since then, this concept has remained at the core of Japan’s Asia policy.

It is notable that in the 2005 DPJ election manifesto the section on constructing “a peaceful and prosperous Asia,” which mentions enhancing trust between Japan and its neighbors, rebuilding Tokyo’s relations with Beijing, and creating an EAC through economic and non-traditional security cooperation among Asian states, precedes the section on the US-Japan alliance.\textsuperscript{13} The 2009 manifesto echoes these ideas, although Japan’s relations with Asia are discussed after those with America, thus according the alliance its “traditional” priority place in Japanese diplomacy. The 2009 manifesto calls for making “the greatest possible effort to develop relations of mutual trust” with China and other Asian countries “with the aim of building an EAC.”\textsuperscript{14} The 2009 document also underscores the DPJ’s pledge to re-examine the realignment of American military forces in Japan—a policy that is based on the party’s calls in the 2000s for reducing the US base presence, especially in Okinawa,\textsuperscript{15} and is arguably in line with the DPJ’s willingness to project more “autonomy” from Washington.

**DPJ security policies towards China and the US under Hatoyama\textsuperscript{16}**

The diplomatic priorities of the first DPJ administration of Yukio Hatoyama appeared to emphasize a deepening of Japan’s ties with its East Asian neighbors, especially China, in line with Hatoyama’s political philosophy of “fraternal diplomacy” (yūai gaikō). To some in the Obama administration, the prime minister’s promotion of an EAC based on a joint Japan-China leadership represented a worrisome manifestation of Japan’s perceived diplomatic shift.

Hatoyama stressed that the path to regional community building in East Asia was based on establishing a “win-win” relationship between the two Asian powers and on “expanding” it to the wider Asian region.\textsuperscript{17} His proposal essentially drew upon the European experience whereby the existing financial, economic and non-traditional security cooperation among countries in Asia would lead to a network
of functional collaboration at various levels, with political cooperation seen as a long-term objective. To be sure, the PRC has been one of the pioneers in the region in promoting the EAC, although Beijing’s “exclusivist” stance concerning the membership of the envisaged community has differed from the “inclusivist” approach advocated by Tokyo.\textsuperscript{18} China’s reaction to Hatoyama’s proposal was rather cool, which was unsurprising given its own leadership ambitions in East Asia and its perception of competition from Japan.

The Hatoyama administration also sought to enhance Japan’s defense ties with China by engaging in bilateral discussions on future joint drills between the SDF and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in the areas of search and rescue, disaster relief, and UN peacekeeping. To be sure, wariness of China’s security posture and intentions remained, which was explicit in Hatoyama’s remarks that “when it comes to the [Chinese] military, the transparency is not necessarily sufficient.”\textsuperscript{19}

At the same time, Hatoyama’s statements, such as “we have so far depended on the US too much” and his call for a more “equal” alliance with America, “in which the Japanese side too can actively make proposals,”\textsuperscript{20} raised questions in Washington whether Japan was seeking to distance itself from its closest ally. This perception was reinforced by two major security-related decisions by the DPJ administration. In the first place, Hatoyama did not to extend the SDF’s refueling mission in the Indian Ocean, initially implemented by Koizumi in 2001 in the framework of the US-led “war on terror.” This was in line with the DPJ’s earlier arguments that the mission was an extension of Japan’s support for the Iraq War, which the party had opposed.\textsuperscript{21} Instead, the Hatoyama administration decided to provide Afghanistan with a non-military assistance of $5 billion for humanitarian and reconstruction purposes over a five-year period starting in 2009—a financial package that was appreciated by Obama. Secondly, and arguably with the purpose of distancing itself from the LDP’s policies, the DPJ government reviewed a bilateral agreement for the relocation of the US Marine Corps Futenma Air Station in Okinawa (signed by Bush and Koizumi in 2006) by proposing alternative sites for the transfer. This led to serious tensions with Washington, which was unwilling to change the deal due to a combination of operational and financial considerations related to the realignment of US forces in Asia. Unable to find an alternative site for Futenma, and thereby to fulfill his 2009 electoral pledge of transferring the functions of the base outside Okinawa prefecture, Hatoyama abruptly resigned in June 2010 after only nine months in office.

Hatoyama’s policies did not mean that he was “abandoning” the alliance altogether or was seeking to replace it with some kind of a China-centered (security) arrangement, which would not have been supported by a number of America-friendly members of the DPJ. Hatoyama thus argued that Tokyo and Washington
should “adapt [their bilateral ties] to the evolving environment of the 21st century” (namely to China’s rise), while the US forces in Japan would continue to “function as a public good” by contributing to regional stability and prosperity. The two allies agreed in February 2010 to strengthen their security ties by means of enhanced cooperation between the SDF and the US military in the areas of disaster relief and humanitarian assistance, as well as by developing a common understanding on the security situation in East Asia.

Japan under the first DPJ administration appeared to respond to China’s rise by emphasizing engagement of Beijing in tandem with a strengthened role for Tokyo in regional diplomacy. In retrospect, Hatoyama remained the most vocal DPJ prime minister to promote the idea of an EAC, although supporting East Asian cooperation continued to be a diplomatic objective for the successive DPJ administrations. At the same time, constrained by the diverging views within his government and the DPJ’s own inexperience as a ruling party, Hatoyama’s search for a re-balancing of Japan’s relations with Asia/China and the US eventually ended up in a rather confusing foreign policy.

**DPJ security policies towards China and the US after Hatoyama**

**The Senkakus and Taiwan.** In September 2010 a Chinese fishing boat collided with two vessels of the Japan Coast Guard (JCG) near the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea. The incident led to the arrest by Japan of the Chinese captain, large anti-Japanese public protests in the PRC, cancellation by Beijing of high-level bilateral meetings, and a temporary suspension of Chinese exports of rare earth metals to Japan. The Hu Jintao administration also decided to postpone the bilateral talks on a joint development of some of the gas fields in the contested area around the Senkakus, an agreement that the two countries had reached in 2008.

Domestically, there was a strong criticism not only by the opposition LDP, but also within the ruling DPJ that the Kan administration had conceded to Beijing’s demands and economic sanctions by releasing the Chinese captain, and hence had backed down from its initially uncompromising stance. Kan’s approach, indeed, suggested that he wanted to prevent a further deterioration of the bilateral relations, which was arguably a reflection of his own China-friendly views. At the same time, his government asserted that there was no territorial dispute, for the Senkakus were regarded as Japanese territory. Eventually, the DPJ appeared to shift from an engagement of Beijing to a more pronounced LDP-style hedging, not least because the incident brought to the surface of Japan’s relations with China the lingering mutual strategic suspicion, which Hatoyama had sought to downplay.

After the collision the governments of both Kan and Noda named a number of uninhabited islands near the Senkakus in May 2011 and March 2012, respectively.
This served as a basis for Tokyo to define its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the disputed waters. Under Noda, Japan increased its maritime surveillance activities in the East China Sea and strengthened the JCG’s law enforcement powers by providing it with the authority to arrest “illegal intruders” on remote uninhabited islands. Furthermore, in September 2012 Noda decided to nationalize three of the disputed Senkaku islands. This move led to a subsequent repetition of the 2010 dynamics, characterized once again by widespread anti-Japan protests and boycott of Japanese goods in China, and strained bilateral diplomatic and economic relations. Some Japanese observers, as well as officials in the Noda government, perceived the nationalization to be a more tolerable option for China and hence an attempt by Noda to preempt a potentially worse scenario from happening, namely the purchase of the islands by Tokyo’s nationalist governor at the time, Shintaro Ishihara, on behalf of his metropolitan government. At the same time, the Noda cabinet’s high disapproval ratings and the prospects of a new general election (which eventually brought the LDP back to power in December 2012) suggest that the Senkaku issue was also used by the DPJ administration for domestic political purposes. The overall result was that the DPJ leadership became more, and not less, determined not to defer to Beijing’s interests.

The Japanese government’s response was also influenced by the negative popular perceptions and distrust of China, which soared in the wake of the 2010 collision incident and were consistent with a general trend in Japanese public opinion in the post-Cold War period of increasing dislike of China. For example, in October 2010, a record 87% of Japanese considered China to be untrustworthy. An August 2011 poll showed that 78.3% of those surveyed held unfavorable impressions of the PRC with the largest number, 64.6%, indicating the CCP government’s response to the 2010 incident as a main reason for their negative feelings. The fact that many Japanese people continue to perceive their neighbor’s rise with suspicion and fear, despite (or, perhaps, because of) the growing economic interdependence, clearly contributes to these perceptions.

In contrast to the Senkaku dispute, the Taiwan issue was not a source of tensions in Japan’s relations with China under the DPJ. This was due, in part, to the substantial improvement of cross-Taiwan Strait relations under President Ma (discussed in the next section). Although the DPJ leadership officially supported the stabilization of relations, its attitude towards the Taiwan issue could have been somewhat ambivalent with the rapprochement between Taipei and Beijing. Indeed, Taiwan’s close location to Japanese territory—in an area vital to Japan’s economy where shipping lanes pass—means that any developments across the Strait have immediate strategic implications for Japan. Further deepening of cross-Strait ties might be regarded by Tokyo as a change in the status quo, and thus a concern from the perspective of Japan’s own energy security interests and its alliance with the US. With the ongoing row over the Senkakus and Ma’s
China-friendly policy the Taiwan issue may have acquired, from Tokyo’s perspective, a somewhat different dimension. Indeed, it appears now to be a source of concern regarding a potential cooperation between the island and mainland China against Japan. This view is certainly shared by some critics of the Ma government in Taiwan, who fear that there is a growing international perception of ROC aligning with the PRC in regional disputes against major US allies, such as Japan.

To be sure, this tough political rhetoric was somewhat balanced by assurances on the part of both Kan and Noda that Japan was seeking a mutually beneficial, strategic relationship with its neighbor. The fact that the PRC is Japan’s number one trading partner certainly influenced the DPJ’s continuing engagement of China, especially in the economic and diplomatic areas. Successive Democratic administrations supported regular high-level summits with Beijing and the institutionalization of Japan-China-ROK meetings. In May 2012 the three countries agreed to launch discussions on a trilateral FTA. The DPJ governments further focused on enhancing military transparency and confidence building with Beijing. This included regular high-level defense meetings and bilateral military exchanges, such as naval port calls, as well as an agreement in December 2011 to launch maritime cooperation talks in order to prevent potential ship collisions at sea. However, as a result of the tensions in the East China Sea the planned discussions of a Japan-China maritime coordination mechanism were put on hold.

Wariness of China. Japan’s wariness under the DPJ of the PRC’s regional security intentions became more pronounced after Hatoyama, especially under Noda. The administrations of both Kan and Noda openly expressed Japan’s security worries on many occasions. For example, soon after becoming prime minister in 2010 and even before the collision incident later that year, Kan stressed that Japan was “paying great attention to China’s burgeoning military power” and that the US military presence in Japan was an important deterrent against the PRC. Noda in 2011 publicly stated his concern about “their [PRC’s] reinforcement of national defense power, which lacks transparency, and their acceleration of maritime activities,” and warned in an article that China’s “high-handed foreign posture...backed by its military capabilities...is stoking fears that China will disrupt the order within the region.” The 2010 National Defense Program Guideline (NDPG) adopted by the Kan government pointed out that China’s military modernization, intensifying maritime activities and insufficient defense transparency were “a matter of concern for the regional and international community.”

In a similar vein, the 2011 White Paper on Defense described the PRC’s response to “conflicting interest[s]” with its neighbors as “assertive,” thus alluding to the East and South China Seas disputes.

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Pragmatic assessment of Japan’s security needs. After the collision incident many DPJ leaders “rediscovered” “the ongoing value” of Tokyo’s alliance with the US, as the incident essentially exposed Japan’s lack of defense alternatives in the face of a rising China. In the wake of the collision senior US officials, including then Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, stressed that the islands fell within the scope of Article 5 of the US-Japan Security Treaty. Kan was grateful to the Obama administration for reaffirming America’s treaty obligations to defend Japan in case of a conflict over the Senkakus. To Japanese observers, it was the PRC’s “belligerent” response to the 2010 boat collision incident and its “assertive stance in the East China Sea” that had led to the “advancement” of security cooperation between Tokyo and Washington. The PLA’s “stepped-up pace of activity” in the East and South China Seas, its intention to build a blue-water navy and establish anti-access/area-denial (A2AD) capabilities came to be perceived by Japan as common concerns with the US, as well as “among countries along its [Chinese] periphery.” The fact that the PRC’s missiles aimed at Taiwan are multifunctional, and hence can target Okinawa or be used in the Senkaku dispute (something on which China does not reveal details), is a serious concern for Tokyo as well.

In its relations with Washington, the words “independence” and “autonomy” conspicuously disappeared from the DPJ administrations’ political rhetoric after Hatoyama. Instead, the references to the US-Japan alliance being “the cornerstone of Japanese diplomacy and national security,” and “a publicly shared asset” fostering the stability in the Asia-Pacific region and the world acquired a stronger (LDP-style) diplomatic emphasis. The boat collision incident reinforced Japan’s strategic convergence with the US on the common “China threat.” For example, the Kan and Obama administrations reached an agreement in 2010 for a strengthening of the bilateral strategic consultations concerning the PRC’s military build-up, and its increasing maritime presence in the East and South China Seas. Underscoring that the alliance “remains indispensable in ensuring the peace and security of Japan,” the 2010 NDPG called for enhanced cooperation with the US in Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD), for joint military training exercises and for joint surveillance activities, among others. The document’s emphasis on the Chinese military power appeared to be in line with Washington’s 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review that expressed US concerns about Beijing’s military strategy in the Western Pacific, especially its improved A2AD capabilities. This strategic convergence was reaffirmed in April 2012 in the Obama-Noda joint statement, which underscored the strengthening of the bilateral security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region and hence reflected the Obama administration’s “pivot” to Asia.

On the two important issues for the US, namely the Futenma base relocation and the joint development of military technology, Japan’s policies appeared to reflect Noda’s strategic pragmatism. The bilateral agreement of April 2012
states that 9,000 US Marines will be transferred from Okinawa to other locations in the Asia Pacific. It essentially “de-links” the transfer from the base relocation, which was reportedly an idea proposed to Washington by the Noda government in December 2011. Although the agreement did not indicate a breakthrough on the Futenma issue, merely expressing the allies’ commitment to resolving it, it had benefits for both sides: Obama could move forward with Washington’s realignment strategy in Asia, while Noda and the DPJ appeared to be (partly) successful in fulfilling their electoral pledge to reduce the US military presence in Okinawa.

The Noda administration in December 2011 also relaxed Japan’s 1967 weapons export ban (something the DPJ was against when it was in opposition)—a move long desired by the US, but also supported by Japan’s defense industry due to the economic benefits it is expected to bring. The country can now take part in joint development and production of military technology, as well as export military equipment for peacekeeping purposes. Noda’s simultaneous selection of the Lockheed Martin’s F-35 jet as Japan’s next main fighter aircraft appeared to be a rather pragmatic approach to Tokyo’s relations with Washington. Indeed, it sought a reinforcement of the alliance by means of providing Tokyo with immediate economic gains, for Japanese companies would be involved in the manufacturing process of the fighter jet.

At the same time, Japan’s apprehension about the projected cuts in the US national defense budget and Tokyo’s concomitantly growing concerns about Chinese military power arguably led the DPJ administrations to take more steps in the direction of strengthening the country’s own defense posture. The 2010 NDPG, for example, introduced the “dynamic defense force” concept that stressed mobility and swift response by the SDF to diverse security emergencies, as well as called for an enhanced defense of Japan’s southwestern islands—clearly in response to Tokyo’s maritime tensions with Beijing. The projected armed force restructuring included, among others, an increase in the number of SDF submarines from 16 to 22 and the number of Aegis destroyers from four to six, and the addition of 21 new patrol vessels to the JCG. The increase in the maritime self-defense forces budget, reflective of Japan’s growing interest in amphibious capabilities, appeared to be a major indicator of Japan’s determination to build a stronger self-defense, while continuing to enhance ties with its US ally.

Finally, the DPJ initiated a number of security initiatives with countries in the wider Asia Pacific. The Hatoyama administration in May 2010 signed an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) with Australia—the second one in addition to the existing ACSA with the US. The Noda administration promoted maritime security cooperation with ASEAN and India, reflected in the November 2011 Japan-ASEAN Joint Declaration and the December 2011 Japan-India Joint Statement, respectively. Japan further reinforced its security ties with Vietnam and the Philippines, countries that, like Japan, are especially concerned about
the PLA’s growing maritime security presence. Enhancing military-to-military links and trilateral ties with regional countries constituted an important aspect of the DPJ’s security policies. For example, the SDF in 2010 observed for the first time the US-ROK military drills and conducted its first joint naval exercise with the Indian Navy in June 2012.

**Taiwan’s China policy under Ma and relations with the US**

The KMT’s return to power and Ma’s core policy principles. Chen Shui-bian was elected president in 2000 on a DPP platform that stressed Taiwanese identity, the winning of international recognition for Taiwan’s democratic and economic achievements, and a greater international space. Chen’s policies, however, appeared to move the island towards *de jure* independence, gradually isolating it from the growing (largely China-led) trade interdependence in East Asia and ultimately leading Taipei to sustaining losses as far as its international credibility was concerned. His provocative approach towards Beijing resulted in a dramatic rise in tensions with China and alienation of Taiwan’s closest friend, the US. The George W. Bush administration (and many East Asian governments, including Japan) feared that the DPP administration was causing an unnecessary confrontation with the PRC, in which Washington (and Tokyo) might be dragged.

From the perspective of Taiwan’s deteriorated economy and international isolation, it may not be surprising that in the January 2008 elections the KMT’s pragmatic and China-friendly agenda allowed it to secure a comfortable majority in the Legislative Yuan, winning 81 of the 113 seats, with the KMT candidate, Ma Ying-jeou, becoming president in May 2008 with an overwhelming majority vote (58%). His top priority was to “revitalize the economy and … promote cross-Strait peace,” by deepening economic integration between the two sides. In the KMT administration’s view, if Taiwan were “able to normalize … economic relations with the Chinese mainland,” it would be in “a much better position to improve” its ties with other countries. In other words, good relations with the PRC were seen as a precondition to ending the island’s economic isolation of the Chen era and to recovering its international standing.

Ma’s agenda, indeed, emphasized restoring Taiwan’s position both in East Asia and internationally, by pledging to work “to renew mutual trust with countries like the US.” Japan, too, figured in the KMT’s diplomatic objectives. In 2006, Japan overtook the US to become Taiwan’s second-largest trading partner. Right from the start of his first term in office (2008-2012) Ma expressed interest in promoting stronger ties with Tokyo, by seeking to establish a “special partnership” and to sign an economic agreement.
Ma’s 2008 election pledges concerning cross-Strait relations, or the “three Nos” policy—no unification, no independence, and no use of force—were seen to reaffirm the status quo across the Strait by promising the Taiwanese people the protection of the island’s political autonomy, while assuring Beijing that Taiwan would not move towards de jure independence. The three “Nos” were complemented by the slogan “economics first, politics later.” It meant that Ma would not seek political discussions with the CCP, and hence sought to convey a clear message to both Beijing and the world. Ma further called for an early resumption of negotiations between the two sides on the basis of the “1992 consensus,” the latter being acceptable to the CCP from the perspective of the “one China” principle. He also hoped that the two sides would pursue “truce” in the international arena by not entering into “a vicious cycle to win over diplomatic allies from the other side.”

**Ma’s strategy towards Mainland China**

**The economic and diplomatic dimension.** Observers point out that President Ma Ying-jeou’s strategy towards the mainland has sought, first and foremost, to restore cross-Strait stability by moving away from a confrontational tone of interactions with the PRC. Secondly, he has focused on building mutual trust by institutionalizing the semi-official bilateral talks and promoting economic integration across the Strait. This strategy appeared to bring swift results when already in June 2008 China’s Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait (ARATS) and Taiwan’s Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF) re-instituted direct negotiations after a nine-year gap. By the end of the year the “three links”—direct flights, maritime shipping and postal services—were re-established.

A major achievement for Ma was the signing in June 2010 of the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA)—a de facto FTA—which was set to cut tariffs on 539 Taiwanese products and on 267 Chinese items. The signing of ECFA was, of course, a priority for Ma’s mainland China policy since the PRC is Taiwan’s largest trading partner. The administration also hoped that the ECFA would remove the island’s “major political obstacle” for concluding similar trade agreements with East Asian countries and hence make Taiwan part of the region’s growing network of FTAs. Taipei embarked on trade negotiations with Singapore in 2010, and launched feasibility studies on prospective bilateral FTAs with New Zealand and India in 2011. The Ma government also signed in 2011 an investment accord with Japan, calling on Tokyo to consider a bilateral FTA. No doubt, the ECFA and the stabilized cross-Strait relations have increased the appeal of the Taiwanese market and have restored the island’s international credibility. Indeed, in April 2009, after a decade-long bid, Taiwan was given an observer status at the World Health Assembly (WHA) under the name of “Chinese Taipei.”
The expansion of the island’s “international space” under Ma has been questioned, however. Taiwan’s participation at the WHA is based on an annual invitation by the WHO secretariat and is, in reality, conditioned upon Beijing’s goodwill, as the PRC might revoke that invitation if Taipei moved towards a more provocative approach. Observers also doubt whether China would approve of Taiwan’s signing trade agreements in the future. The CCP leadership has not made any promises in this regard and may treat some cases, for example the accord with Singapore, as being an exception rather than the rule. The diplomatic truce that the two sides are said to have achieved, most notably seen in Beijing’s decline to “steal” some of Taipei’s formal diplomatic partners (23 at the moment), even when approached, for example, by Paraguay and Nicaragua, is also contingent upon Ma’s accommodation policy towards China and the latter’s “goodwill.”

Ma’s January 2012 re-election appeared to raise more uncertainties regarding Taiwan’s diplomatic and regional economic aspirations. Further concessions from the PRC would likely depend on Ma’s willingness to discuss issues of “high politics” should Beijing put pressure on him, which, according to some Taiwanese experts, is already the case. The fact that in the latest Legislative Yuan elections the KMT lost 17 seats (the DPP gained 13 seats and increased its strength to 40), while some 67% of the public showed strong dissatisfaction with Ma’s performance already at the start of his second term mean that the KMT government faces significant constraints for pursing its agenda. Therefore, Ma will most probably seek to “buy time” for Taiwan in order to enhance its economy and defense, by putting off the political discussions as long as possible.

The politico-security dimension. In the area of “high politics,” Ma’s policy towards the mainland in his first term was guided by the principle of “economics first, politics later,” and he declined offers from Beijing in 2009 and 2010 to engage in political talks. This approach has continued in Ma’s second term, with the KMT government’s focus being on preserving the sovereign status of the ROC, while getting benefits for Taiwan from closer economic relations with China. Indeed, the president has repeatedly sought to reassure the Taiwanese people that deepened economic ties were not jeopardizing the island’s political autonomy. He has stressed, for example in his 2012 inauguration speech, that “when we speak of ‘one China,’ naturally it is the Republic of China,” and has expressed commitment to maintaining the status quo of the three “Nos.” Ma’s critics, however, fear that simply demanding more economic agreements without making political concessions will lead the PRC to withdraw some economic benefits in order to pressure the KMT government for political negotiations.
To be sure, Ma appeared to be “testing the waters” when during his re-election campaign in October 2011 he floated the idea of a cross-Strait peace agreement within the next decade. Responding to the strong criticism by the opposition DPP, which argued that any such peace talks would undermine US military and diplomatic support, and to the lacking domestic consensus on this issue, Ma downplayed this proposal later in his election campaign. Indeed, he is well aware that an absolute majority of the Taiwanese continue to prefer maintaining the status quo across the Strait—a trend that is observed in studies on public opinion in the 2000s.\(^{66}\) Latest opinion polls confirm that 86.2% of respondents are in favor of this centrist position (as opposed to unification or independence) and 70.8% support the Ma administration’s “three Nos” policy.\(^{67}\) Furthermore, despite the growing economic interdependence with China (similarly to the Japanese case) and improved ties, latest surveys show that nearly 50% of Taiwanese perceive the CCP government’s attitude towards the administration in Taipei to be “unfriendly” as opposed to 33% who believe it to be “friendly.”\(^{68}\) These high perceptions of Beijing’s hostility towards Taiwan, observed in successive public opinion surveys in the 2000s, do not bode well for an eventual start of political talks. Indeed, Ma, himself has called on China to reduce or withdraw the 1,200 or so missiles targeting the island, acknowledging that the PRC has remained a military threat with its continuing military build-up along the cost opposite Taiwan. In this regard, the insufficient political trust between the two sides is seen as the main reason for Taiwan’s unwillingness to plan and engage in military CBMs.\(^{69}\)

It is notable that at a press conference immediately after his May 2012 inauguration Ma appeared to move further away from the idea of a peace accord, by indicating that there was no urgency for negotiating such a pact with China. Observers point out that without a peace agreement the likelihood of Beijing making further gestures of goodwill concerning the island’s diplomatic aspirations is fairly slim.\(^{70}\) At the same time, although Taiwanese experts admit that the domestic situation on the island is not yet ripe for starting political talks, there appears to be an emerging domestic consensus that the signing of further (economic) agreements with the Chinese mainland will require Taiwan to move to the sensitive area of “high politics.”\(^{71}\)

**Ma’s national security strategy and relations with the US**

**Enhancing ROC’s self-defense efforts.** ROC’s national security strategy rests on the three pillars of “institutionalized cross-Strait rapprochement,” “viable diplomacy,” and “strong defense.”\(^{72}\) In his first term, Ma prioritized the first objective of building peace with mainland China. This has led to a dramatic reduction of cross-Strait tensions and the signing of 18 bilateral agreements. As pointed out earlier, the KMT administration has achieved some progress with the regard to the second objective of enhancing Taiwan’s international space. Following the
start of his second term, however, Ma expressed displeasure that Taiwan still faced many constraints to its participation in the international arena (thus alluding to the China factor).

The third pillar of ROC’s national security strategy under Ma is to ensure that Taiwan could deter external threats by maintaining a credible defense. In particular, the KMT government regards the upgrading of the island’s weapons systems (purchased from the US) as a means of bolstering Taiwan’s confidence in dealing with China. Therefore, having good relations with the Obama administration and ensuring Washington’s defense commitment under the TRA are perceived by Taipei to be critical to the island’s political survival. Ma’s repeated calls on Beijing to remove the PRC’s missiles aimed at Taiwan and on Washington to continue US sales of defensive weapons have reflected the administration’s assessment that “for Taiwan’s security we cannot place our hopes only on improved relations with China.” At the same time, ROC’s defense officials emphasize that Taiwan cannot solely rely on the US for protection, so the island should enhance its own self-defense capabilities in order to prevent both a war in the Taiwan Strait and China’s potential occupation of Taiwan.

To this end, the Ministry of National Defense (MND) issued in 2009 Taiwan’s first Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR). It stressed the building of a “hard ROC” defense force and prioritized war prevention in the Taiwan Strait through deterrence, future cross-Strait military CBMs, and security cooperation with countries in the Asia-Pacific. Based on the concept of “preventive defense,” the main purpose of Taiwan’s defense now is to resist invasion and to counter a blockade of the island by developing basic military strength and asymmetric war-fighting capabilities.

Taiwan has, however, faced difficulties in modernizing its military capabilities and in implementing the QDR objectives. ROC’s senior officials and many observers attribute this to Taiwan’s tight fiscal situation in the wake of the global financial crisis. Nevertheless, the island’s determination to self-defense under Ma is increasingly questioned by its closest friend. Indeed, some observers and officials in the US now wonder whether America’s commitment to the island’s defense is actually stronger than Taiwan’s own commitment. To critics, Ma’s calls for arms sales are merely political rhetoric, since he appears unwilling to either allocate the necessary budget or publicly advocate the weapons acquisition in order to avoid hurting ties with mainland China. What has also contributed to this perception is, for example, Ma’s failure to meet his 2008 electoral pledge of 3% GDP spending on defense. ROC’s defense budget actually dropped from 2.51% of GDP in 2009 to 2.15% of GDP in 2011. To Ma’s critics domestically this is puzzling, as the rapid improvement of cross-Strait relations since 2008 has not led to a (corresponding) reduction of China’s military build-up along the coast facing Taiwan or to security assurances by Beijing. This, in turn, is an equivocal
reminder that the PRC is still considering the use of “non-peaceful” means to reunify with Taiwan on the basis of the 2005 Anti-Secession Law.

The 2012 Pentagon Report points out that even though the island has taken some steps to “address gaps in military capabilities,” its defense advantages have been “eroding” and the military balance “continues to trend in Beijing’s favor.” By November 2011 China had reportedly deployed some 1,200 short-range ballistic missiles opposite Taiwan, and while the PLA still lacks the capabilities “to conduct a full-scale amphibious invasion” or “enforce a full military blockade,” its ability to strike economic and military targets on the island, and “to deter, delay, or deny possible intervention by third parties” is said to have significantly improved. While Ma’s critics admit that Taiwan should not give an excuse to China to use military force and hence should avoid provocations, they worry that the KMT government has not sufficiently invested in ROC’s defense.

**Relations with the US and Japan.** The Ma Ying-jeou administration has emphasized that “restoring mutual trust” with America is a priority for Taiwan’s diplomacy. This has arguably been successful as Obama has repeatedly supported Ma’s policies of cross-Strait rapprochement, while reaffirming Washington’s adherence to the TRA. Ma has secured two arms sales packages from Obama—in January 2010 (US$6.4 billion) and in September 2011 (US$5.8 billion). The packages did not include diesel-electric submarines and advanced fighter aircraft the F-16C/Ds, regarded by Taiwan as a high priority for its defense but strongly objected by China. Obama did address, however, Taiwan’s growing military capabilities gap with the PRC by approving an upgrade of its aging fleet of 145 F-16A/B jets. Defense cooperation with the US has deepened at both the strategic and tactical levels, and the bilateral negotiations of a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) are now planned to resume. Economic interests are, indeed, at stake, for the US (after Japan) is the island’s third largest trading partner and its largest foreign investor.

It is notable that Ma in his 2012 inauguration speech mentioned Japan (after the US) as one of Taiwan’s major partners by pointing out that Taiwan-Japan relations were in “the friendliest state of bilateral ties in 40 years.” This reflected the growing bilateral trade relations and expanded cooperation, which was “codified” with the signing in 2010 of a memorandum of understanding. In addition, in the wake of the 2011 disaster in Japan, ROC’s government and private sector donated over US$186 million for post-disaster relief programs. This made Taiwan the largest donor and was deeply appreciated by the Japanese people.

Japan’s role in Asian security as a close US ally and the Ma administration’s emphasis on enhanced defense cooperation with regional countries are important factors behind Taiwan’s interest in promoting ties with Tokyo. Indeed, the island’s political survival in the face of a rising China depends on Japan’s continuing role.
as a major “spoke” in the US security system in East Asia.\(^8^7\) The ambiguous reference made to the “situations in areas surrounding Japan” in the 1997 bilateral US-Japan Defense Guidelines still remains an indicator of a potential future applicability of the alliance to Taiwan Strait contingencies.

In response to the April 2012 joint Noda-Obama statement on Asian-Pacific security the Ma government welcomed the US-Japan alliance’s strengthening for the purposes of stability and security in the region. This was an explicit recognition by Taiwan of the alliance’s role as a balancing force in Asia vis-à-vis a rising China with direct implications for ROC’s security. Maintaining the *status quo* in the Taiwan Strait is indispensable for ensuring the support of the US and Japan for the island’s defense.\(^8^8\) Ma has been clear that the ROC is not intending to join hands with the PRC on the disputed islands with Japan, which is arguably recognition that potential cooperation between Taipei and Beijing on that issue is likely to upset the delicate balance by forcing Washington to choose sides.\(^8^9\)

At the same time, the KMT administration is aware that the recent improvement in cross-Strait relations may have raised certain concerns in both Japan and the US regarding a potential change in the *status quo* in the Taiwan Strait. Domestically, the critics of the KMT government argue that the signals Ma sends with his policies towards the mainland make America, and other friendly countries (namely, Japan), think that Taiwan may not need outside support.\(^9^0\) These perceptions, in turn, could alter these countries’ defense strategies in the Asia Pacific, especially by leading to more calls in the US for “abandoning Taiwan.” The president’s “three Nos” policy as well as calls for deepening Taiwan’s bilateral economic and special partnerships with Washington and Tokyo have arguably sought to allay such worries. Ma’s reassurance to the US that Taiwan is not seeking a final political settlement with China appears to be a response to the above concerns as well.\(^9^1\)

Conclusion

This article has examined the impact of the changed domestic political environment in Japan and Taiwan in the second half of the 2000s on their respective relations with China and the US. The article has sought to find out whether the change in domestic politics, namely the coming to power of administrations that are more moderate (if not altogether “friendly”) towards China, has resulted in a political willingness on the part of Tokyo and Taipei to seek accommodation with the PRC at the expense of ties with the US.

The analysis yields the following conclusions. In the first place, the altered domestic political situation produced less of a change in the Japanese case than in the Taiwanese one, even though Japan’s China policy under the DPJ generally reflected Tokyo’s efforts not to allow contentious issues—namely the *Senkaku*
dispute—to destabilize the bilateral relations. While this meant avoiding confrontation, it did not suggest a willingness to accommodate an assertive China. Indeed, although the DPJ sought to pursue positive relations with both Beijing and Washington, the 2010 collision incident in the East China Sea reversed Japan’s moderate approach towards China and upset the delicate balance that Tokyo had sought to maintain in its ties with the US and the PRC. The incident brought to the surface of Japan’s China policy the deep-seated strategic mistrust and resulted in a reassessment by the DPJ’s leadership of Japan’s material power capabilities in light of the PRC’s growing military power. The DPJ thus largely continued the LDP’s hedging strategy towards its neighbor by investing more heavily in Japan’s own (maritime) defense in tandem with maintaining the alliance with Washington. The DPJ also focused on expanding Japan’s security partnerships beyond the traditional one with the US—another manifestation of Japanese hedging towards the PRC and possibly a reflection of a deeper strategic concern that Tokyo policy-makers may have with regard to the future reliability of America’s security umbrella. Finally, the analysis of the DPJ’s security policies suggests that even in the absence of the collision incident the political will for accommodation of the PRC would still be tempered by relative power considerations and concerns about the PRC’s growing military strength. These concerns are posited to dominate Japan’s China policy in the near future now that the conservative Shinzo Abe and his LDP have returned to power, although engagement of the PRC will not be “abandoned.”

In Taiwan, the transition of power from the DPP to the KMT brought a profound change in ROC’s policy towards the Chinese mainland, especially in comparison with the DPP era. Ma Ying-jeou has embraced an accommodation strategy through assurances and confidence building, thereby seeking to enhance the island’s security through diplomatic and economic means.92 At the same time, this accommodation approach has not led to any signs of concessions to China in the politico-security area. Ma has clearly stated that improved ties do not mean that Taiwan is seeking reunification or is prepared to give up its goal of achieving more international space. The purpose of rapprochement thus appears to be the preservation of Taiwan’s democratic system and political independence rather than moving towards a political resolution (in favor of China).93 It is, therefore, questionable whether Ma’s strategy should be regarded as a strategic policy shift due to the altered domestic political situation, or a necessary tactical adjustment meant to stabilize relations with the PRC, re-gain the trust of the US, and improve the island’s international credibility. The evidence presented in this article suggests that Ma has quite pragmatically sought cross-Strait rapprochement, as well as a workable relationship with China, in pursuit of specific diplomatic objectives, including enhanced (economic) relations with countries in the Asia Pacific and close US allies, such as Japan. Relative power considerations
have clearly played a role in Ma’s strategy: while the US arms sales are not sufficient to close the growing cross-Strait military gap amid the PLA’s rapid modernization, they are a political tool to keep Washington committed to Taiwan’s defense and to deter China. Similarly to Japan, therefore, Taiwan has sought to strike a balance between engaging China and not alienating the US, although Taipei, in contrast to Tokyo, has appeared more willing to emphasize accommodation of Beijing, at least for now.

The second observation in this article is that the particular security limitations that Japan and Taiwan each continue to face (as China’s military power grows) necessitate the maintenance of their defense ties with the US, while they seek to work with Beijing in the economic area. The examination of the DPJ’s and KMT’s security policies, respectively, has only reinforced the validity of this argument. Although Japan can, theoretically, move towards an autonomous defense, for it has the technological and economic power to do so, this would require a revision of Article 9 and acquisition of offensive weapons—policies that remain politically divisive (even within the conservative LDP) and that do not have domestic public support in Japan. In the case of Taiwan, its lacking international recognition as a state means that it cannot enter into legal security arrangements with other countries in the Asia Pacific, especially with major powers such as Japan, or join regional security organizations. Without the US as its main security protector the island would be vulnerable to a militarily strong China and would likely need to give up its political autonomy—an option opposed by the Taiwanese people and clearly not under consideration by the Ma administration (and even unthinkable for the opposition DPP).

As long as Japan and Taiwan each continue to fear that China’s growing military power may adversely affect their respective national interests, neither of them is likely to seek long-term accommodation with the PRC, irrespective of the shifting domestic politics. At the same time, the question that remains for both Tokyo and Taipei is how sustainable and reliable the US security umbrella will be in the medium- to long-term. For the time being, therefore, striking a balance between “America-friendly” and “China-friendly” policies is posited to continue in both capitals.

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Notes

1 In this article, the PRC, China, and mainland China, on the one hand, and Taiwan and the ROC, on the other hand, are used interchangeably.

2 Article 9, also known as the “peace clause,” renounces the use of military force as a legitimate instrument of statecraft and commits Japan to non-possession of war potential. The official government interpretation of Article 9 is that Japan is permitted to maintain only the minimum level of armed force necessary for self-defense, but is prohibited from exercising its right to collective self-defense.

3 This view by no means excludes the Japanese influence over the drafting process.

4 The TRA was passed into law by the US Congress in 1979 when Washington recognized the government in Beijing as the only legitimate government of China thus de-recognizing Taiwan. The TRA does not officially commit Washington to intervene militarily on Taipei’s behalf in case of an attack by the mainland, but merely expresses America’s concern should such situation were to occur. It also stresses that the US will provide Taiwan with the necessary weapons and services for self-defense.


7 The LDP’s strength in the chamber declined from 296 seats to 119 seats.


15 Sneider, “The New Asianism.”

16 For the purposes of this article, the discussion is limited to the security dimension of Japan’s China policy and does not include an examination of the history issue.

China supports an EAC centered on ASEAN + 3, whereas Japan advocates a more inclusive community with India, Australia and New Zealand as members.


Sneider, “The New Asianism”.


Sneider, “The New Asianism.”


Interview with Dr. Tsai Zheng-jia, Center for Contemporary Japan Studies, National Chengchi University.

Interview with Dr. Joseph Wu, Institute of International Relations, National Chengchi University.


Tensions between Japan and the ROK have risen since 2011 due to the “comfort women” issue and the dispute over the Takeshima/Dokdo islands, especially in the wake of Lee Myung-bak’s visit to the islands in August 2012.


The view that the row over the Senkakus has reinforced the US-Japan alliance was also expressed in an interview by the author with Dr. Tsai Zheng-jia.


Interview with Dr. Simon Chang, Department of Political Science, National Taiwan University.


The success of “Operation Tomodachi” conducted by the US military in the wake of the 3/11 disaster in Japan also influenced this choice. I would like to thank Garren Mulloy for bringing this to my attention.


Interview with Dr. Tsai Zheng-jia.

An example of this was Chen’s proposal for holding a national referendum on his “two states on each side of the Strait” formula simultaneously with the 2004 presidential election.


Ibid.

Interview with Prof. Arthur S. Ding, Acting Director, Institute of International Relations, National Chengchi University.

Office of the President, ROC, “Transcript of Presidential Press Conference”.

Japan’s share of Taiwan’s total trade for 2010 was 13%, coming second after the PRC’s share of 21%.


The term “1992 consensus” was coined in April 2000 by Dr. Su Chi, who was Chairman of the Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) in the Lee Teng-hui government and then National Security Council Secretary General in the Ma administration. The consensus is not written in a single document, but was reached in 1992 by Taipei and Beijing during a process of
exchange of notes and statements (author’s personal communication with Su Chi). This consensus means that both parties accept that there is “one China”. For the KMT, each side has its own interpretation of how to define it, while for the CCP there is no interpretation.


Interviews with Dr. Liu Fu-kuo, Executive Director, Center for Security Studies, National Chengchi University, and Dr. Su Chi, Chairman of Taipei Forum, respectively.

Zhang, “Taiwan’s New Grand Strategy”.

Chu, “Navigating between China and the United States”, p. 150.

Tsai, “Cross-Strait Rapprochement”.


Interviews in Taipei.

Interview with Dr. Simon Chang.


Interview with a Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) official who requested to remain anonymous.

Chu, “Navigating between China and the United States”.


Interview with Dr. Joseph Wu.

Chu, “Navigating between China and the United States”.


Ibid.

Interview with Vice-Minister Andrew Yang, Ministry of National Defense (MND), ROC.

Ding, “Cross-Strait Peace Agreement”.

Interviews in Taipei.

Office of the President, ROC, “President Ma’s Inaugural Address”.

Interview with a MAC official.


Interview with Vice-Minister Andrew Yang.


Interviews in Taipei.

Robert G. Sutter, “Taiwan Issue in Contemporary U.S.-China Relations,” in

Ibid.


Interview with Dr. Joseph Wu.


Ibid., pp. 18, 21.

Interview with Dr. Joseph Wu.

Interview with Prof. Arthur S. Ding.

Office of the President, ROC, “President Ma’s Inaugural Address”.

Interview with a MAC official.

Interview with Prof. Arthur S. Ding.

Interview with a MAC official.

Interview with Dr. Joseph Wu.

Interview with Dr. Simon Chang.

Zhang, “Taiwan’s New Grand Strategy”.

Interview with Vice-Minister Andrew Yang.

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