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U.S.–China Relations After Resolution of Taiwan’s Status

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Cover photo: 060906-N-9643K-006 Pearl Harbor, Hawaii (Sept. 6, 2006) - Chinese Sailors man the rails aboard the destroyer Qingdao (DDG 113) as they arrive in Pearl Harbor. Two ships representing China's Navy, the destroyer Qingdao and the oiler Hongzhe (AOR 881) arrived in Pearl Harbor for a routine port visit. U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist Joe Kane (RELEASED)

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Summary

Although it appears unlikely that the question of Taiwan's status and ultimate relationship to China will be resolved any time soon, it is instructive to speculate about how its resolution might affect U.S.-China relations. There are, broadly speaking, ten different logical possibilities for trajectories that the cross-Strait relationship could follow. Four of them are peaceful (see pp. 6–11):

- continuation of the current unresolved status quo
- peaceful unification
- peaceful independence
- a compromise resolution.

Six involve Chinese use of force against Taiwan (see pp. 11–19):

- violent unification with U.S. intervention
- violent unification without U.S. intervention
- violent independence with U.S. intervention
- violent independence without U.S. intervention
- violent irresolution with U.S. intervention
- violent irresolution without U.S. intervention.

Looking across all these cases reveals that simply assuming that the Taiwan situation has been “resolved” is hardly enough to understand the nature of the subsequent security relationship between China and the United States. Instead, the manner and mode in which the Taiwan question is decided will make a great deal of difference. To the

extent one can generalize, the obvious appears to be true: The consequences of peaceful outcomes—including continued peaceful irresolution—are both more predictable and generally better for relations between Washington and Beijing (see pp. 6–11, 20–22).

In contrast, nonpeaceful resolutions of Taiwan's status could cause U.S.-China relations to fall anywhere from reasonable amity to a Cold War–like confrontation, depending on the circumstances surrounding the conflict and its outcome. If the result is formal independence for Taiwan, subsequent U.S.-China relations will likely be cooperative. If the result is forcible unification for Taiwan, the United States and China will likely find themselves in a hostile cold war (see pp. 11–18, 20–22).

For more than 25 years, U.S. policy has, above all else, sought to ensure that any resolution of Taiwan's status occurs peacefully. The implication of the findings of this study is that, as China's power and confidence in its military capabilities grow and therefore the possibility of Beijing attempting to bring about unification through force increases, preventing such an attempt from occurring while maintaining the capability to defeat it will become increasingly important even as it becomes increasingly difficult.