In an era of improving Taiwan-China relations, the question of the importance of the United States’ relationship with Taiwan is open to discussion. With deepening economic ties and improving political relations with China under the Ma Ying-jeou administration, is the United States still important to Taiwan? The answer provided by the panelists at the October 28th roundtable was a definitive “yes.” The United States, according to the panel, is still vitally important for Taiwan’s continued security.

Though each speaker highlighted different aspects of the U.S.-Taiwan relationship, each emphasized the role the U.S. plays for Taiwan. For the panelists, potential U.S. policy directions include continued U.S. commitment, both in security and economics, which they argued is important to Taiwan’s future stability and to its ability to continue improving relations with China.

Bernard Cole of the National War College spoke primarily on the security situation in the Taiwan Strait, and how improving technologies and capacities are changing the strategic picture. “Simple geography,” he argues, provides a frame for any potential conflict over the island, where Chinese submarine and missile capacity could be used to deny U.S. aircraft carrier groups access to the Strait. This could “deter or delay U.S. entry into any sort of scenario involving Taiwan and the mainland,” Cole states. China has an increasing capacity for multiple methods of naval warfare including air, amphibious, mine, and anti-ship ballistic missiles, all of which contribute to their potential threat in the Strait.

From Taiwan’s view, the biggest problem concerning the Chinese military has to do with the way that it has been modernizing its personnel. It enables the Chinese to use increasingly sophisticated technologies, such as ballistic missiles, that require trained operators. To respond to this development, Cole notes that Taiwan has also been improving its personnel and making the island-wide defense structure more coherent despite the lack of new U.S. technical imports. However, he argues that the conscript-based system still needs to be replaced with an all volunteer military as is scheduled to happen by 2014.

Changes in force distribution within the U.S. have also affected the security situation in the Strait. The U.S. Navy grows smaller every year and although it is highly technologically advanced, each ship can only be in one place at a time. The Taiwanese military recognizes that the U.S. has multiple priorities that may differ from their own, thus making U.S. commitment to direct defense potentially variable. The next year will be decisive for the Obama administration to make decisions regarding the sale of arms to Taiwan.

Alan Romberg of the Stimson Center highlighted American attitudes toward the Taiwan Strait in the context of the current
situation. The United States ultimately supports the legitimate aspirations for prosperity and security on both sides of the Strait. This means that the U.S.’s long-standing opposition to unilateral efforts by either side to change the status quo will continue. The U.S. has an essential role in assisting the peaceful development of cross-Strait relations by preventing either side from forcing its position on the other.

Romberg also points out that China-Taiwan relations are becoming more institutionalized. Beijing has adopted measures to help Taiwan’s economy and improve the reception of Ma Ying-jeou’s policies. “There are many ways of thinking about unification and the extended timeline that Beijing now provides for mutual interaction can help shape both sides’ thinking about definitions of such terms as unification, or one China, or even sovereignty,” Romberg stated.

The flexibility provided by this approach allows Taiwan to have a role in the process of expanding trade and reducing tensions without ceding control and sovereignty. The success or failure of the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) that is still under negotiation will be a test of how well this policy can work, and there will be a battle within Taiwan between the Democratic Progressive Party and the Kuomintang on these negotiations. The PRC has shown sensitivity to Taiwan’s position, and made reciprocity an increasingly evident theme in the official commentary about all aspects of cross-Strait relations. Without a political underpinning, however, the cross-Strait relationship is susceptible to disruption, as seen during the Chen Shui-bian era.

According to Romberg, President Obama supports the current framework for improved cross-Strait relations, and has since his 2008 campaign.

The logic for an ongoing U.S. role is clear. As Romberg explains, “A strong Taiwan will be less susceptible to coercion or intimidation and better able to engage the PRC with confidence.” Arms sales and other forms of U.S. support give Ma Ying-jeou the credibility to pursue further cross-Strait ties, and this stabilizes cross-Strait affairs, regional security, and economic development. However, for Beijing, the significance of U.S. arms sales to Taiwan is “not their military utility but what they symbolize in terms of American involvement in what Beijing sees as a quintessentially internal matter.” China also sees U.S. arms sales as a strategic reaction to China’s growing power and influence. These are fundamental issues for China, and will continue to impact the relationships between the three governments.

Nancy Tucker of Georgetown described Taiwan’s relationship with the United States as characterized by "dependence and distrust," because the U.S. and Taiwan have very different priorities. The United States is relieved that the improvement in cross-Strait relations allow it to pay less attention to cross-Strait issues, but Taiwan still desires "significant, continuous, and overt displays of U.S. support." This contradiction is typically seen as the current source of Taiwan-U.S. distrust. However, Tucker argues that the warming trend in cross-Strait relations makes U.S. support even more impor-
tant to Taiwan because it enables Tai-
wan to continue improving that cross-
Strait relationship.

In Tucker’s view, cross-Strait develop-
ments, U.S.-Taiwan and U.S.-China
relations, and Taiwan’s internal politics
are the four major areas of interactions
that drive the debate on security and
economic issues. U.S. support is criti-
cal to Taiwan regardless of whether
cross-Strait relations are positive or
negative, due to the confidence gener-
ated in Taiwan by continued support
and the security benefits of deterring
Chinese aggression.

Chinese missile deployment is one of
the unpredictable complexities in
cross-Strait relations because of its
direct impact on Taiwan’s security, and
it is an example of one issue that re-
lates to all three bilateral relationships.
China has made missile redeployment
contingent on a peace agreement, and
Taiwan has made a peace agreement
contingent on missile redeployment.
The problem is that Beijing can always
move the missiles back even if it rede-
loys them to gain concessions from
Taiwan; consequently U.S. security
support remains vital. President
Obama has clearly resolved to avoid
disputes with Beijing, and this concerns
Taiwan just as much as if Sino-U.S.
relations soured and created a more
dangerous climate for the region.

Additionally, Taiwan’s contentious
internal politics have impeded the de-
velopment of an adequate security pos-
ture. In a reversal of previous condi-
tions, some KMT members now ques-
tion the need for more spending on
defense when cross-Strait relations
have improved, and DPP members
have begun to favor more defense
spending as a way to improve Taiwan’s
negotiating position with China. U.S.-
Taiwan relations also influence cross-
Strait relations. Some in Taiwan worry
that the U.S. is unhappy with improve-
ments in cross-Strait relations, and
others worry that the U.S. is too happy
with the warming relations and will
use this trend as an excuse to reduce
military support for Taiwan.

Taiwan is particularly concerned about
two concrete issues: the U.S. may cut
off arms sales, and the prospect of Tai-
wan becoming increasingly economi-
cally isolated in Asia. Both of these
issues and other areas of U.S.-Taiwan
relations are highly complex for the
U.S. because they complicate U.S.-
China relations. In order to resolve
these issues Tucker asks: "Is it time for
the foundational policies towards U.S.-
Taiwan relations to change, especially
strategic ambiguity and the six assur-
ances?" War in the Taiwan Strait, she
argues, is more likely to come about
due to miscalculation or accident than
it is to be the result of overt action by
any party involved. She hopes that stra-
tegic clarity could be a replacement for
the existing policy, which by its very
nature, provokes distrust.

All three roundtable participants high-
lighted the importance of U.S.-Taiwan
relations to Taiwan’s security. They
also emphasized that it is only with
close ties to the U.S. that Taiwan can
successfully improve relations with
China. The U.S., on the other hand,
must balance its relationship with Tai-
wan with the need for good ties to
China, creating a delicate, three-sided
relationship that the Obama admini-
stration must maintain. The majority
of panelists argued for the continuation
of the status-quo, while Tucker dis-
cussed the need for a reevaluation of
the bedrock principles of the U.S.-
Taiwan relationship. Whichever option
Obama chooses, U.S. policy directions
are still of vital interest to Taiwan.