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Since I was young, I have been interested in diverse cultures, especially Asian cultures. My strong interest in the cross-strait conflict between China, Taiwan and the U.S. is deeply rooted to my family’s history in these conflicts, originating from the period during which Mainlanders were exiled to Taiwan to the socio-economic and political turmoil that arose afterwards. Because of my internship experience in Washington D.C., I gained a greater understanding of the importance of maintaining democracy in sociopolitical instability and the significant role that civility and democratic engagement will play.

As an intern of the U.S.-Taiwan Business Council, my responsibilities focused primarily on analyzing the current economic and security conditions in Cross-Strait relations. The rise of China as a large economic and militaristic force has become one of the major challenges that Taiwan faces in this century. As the Chinese economy continues to grow by increasing its manufacturing sectors, procuring a sophisticated array of defense weaponry, and rapidly advancing in technological innovations, a rising Chinese power may threaten the peace and stability of Cross-Strait relations. China’s economic model has been successful in promoting significant military modernization that further advances its political objectives beyond Chinese peripheries.

After the Chinese Nationalist Party lost the war against the Communist Party in 1949 and was exiled to Taiwan, the Taiwanese populace has been under incessant threats of reunification with the Mainland. Because China does not recognize Taiwanese sovereignty, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continues to maintain the view of the “One China Policy” in which there is only one “Chinese state.” With the subordination of the Taiwanese government being a paramount driving force, the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) modernization program progresses relentlessly. Ultimately, China’s increasing military capabilities threaten maritime security in the Asia-Pacific region.

Furthermore, because of this constant fear of Taiwan’s democracy being at risk, more than 300 students and demonstrators broke into the compound of the Legislative Yuan (LY) around 9 P.M. on March 18, 2014, after the signing of the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement. The pact would allow Chinese and Taiwanese service companies, including banking, telecommunication and tourism firms, to operate in each other’s territory. Along with opposition parties and civic groups, the students and demonstrators staged a full-scale protest that included legislative boycotts, street rallies and a “siege of the legislature.” Protestors declared that they would continue occupying the assembly hall of the LY until Friday, March 21, when deliberations of the pact are expected, or until the agreement is withdrawn from the plenary. Student demonstrators eventually vacated the legislative hall assembly three weeks later on April 8, 2014. Growing concerns over Taiwan’s economy being hollowed out as more investments and businesses head to China still remain prevalent. More importantly, opponents fear Taiwan’s democracy is at risk as Taiwan becomes increasingly reliant on China.

Therefore, civility and democratic engagement become important factors in the efforts of maintaining strong relations with both Taiwan and China. Reassurance to the Taiwanese people, including support in both economic and security issues, can provide Taiwan with confidence when engaging with China. The U.S. should support Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou’s policy of diversifying export destinations so that it will reflect Taiwan’s seriousness and commitment to trade liberalization. Since 1979, the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) has provided a strong foundation in maintaining positive relations between the U.S. and Taiwan, exemplifying the robust partnership between the U.S. and Taiwan in terms of economic prosperity and cultural exchanges. The preservation of the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) is vital to maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, fostering the continued economic and cultural growth, and retaining American primacy in maritime security in the region. Thus, U.S. policies and lack of commitment may invite miscalculations if U.S. posture is not clear. Ultimately, without civility and democratic engagement, Taiwan will continue to be under constant Chinese threats of coercion.

My internship experience in Washington D.C. assisted me with obtaining a stronger understanding of the international system. In turn, I aspire to immerse myself in fully understanding the complex realities of the political systems and economic statuses between the U.S. and other nations, while also valuing the distinct interaction among countries in order to promote the importance of civility and democratic engagement in foreign relations.