
Our Stake in Taiwan

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FEW DIPLOMATIC achievements in history have garnered such universal praise as the rapprochement between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) that was completed in the 1970's during the presidencies of Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Jimmy Carter. After a decades-long period of non-recognition following the end of World War II and the Communist victory in China, diplomatic communication was finally established between Washington and Beijing, and, with it, the balance of power in the cold war shifted dramatically against the Soviet Union. By the mid-1980's, with Mao Zedong dead and China opening itself to both foreign visitors and foreign investment and trade, hopes began to blossom for the day when the two countries might even be able to exercise the sort of shared, benign leadership of Asia that had been the dream of countless Americans and Chinese since as far back as Sun Yat-sen early in the last century.

Throughout the first half of that century, the U.S. and China had been friends. Indeed, even after the ousting of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government by Mao's Commu-

nists in 1949, administration after administration had sought to construct some sort of relationship with Beijing. The fault lay with the Chinese, bent on building a new world order in which the U.S. would have no part. Even John F. Kennedy's charm and ingenuity failed to break through. As Dean Rusk, JFK's Secretary of State, would put it, "they just kept hanging up the phone." Not until the greater menace posed by the Soviet Union brought the two sides together did it prove possible to set aside the main obstacle that, ostensibly, had prevented consummation.

That obstacle was Taiwan, or Formosa as it was then often called: an island approximately the size of the Netherlands that lies about a hundred miles off China's coast. Taiwan was an obstacle because Chiang Kai-shek, who had ruled all of China from 1927 until his defeat in the civil war of 1945-49, had succeeded in continuing his government there, arriving in December 1949.

For reasons of history, the Taiwan to which Chiang repaired had developed in a manner very distinct from China. Physically beautiful but challenging, the island was dominated by high mountains and impassable jungle, with a vast assortment of poisonous snakes and few arable areas. Its earliest inhabitants had not been Chinese at all, but were related instead to the Filipinos and Malays. Nevertheless, it had long appealed to émigrés from China: from the 16th century on, these were

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mostly single males speaking the southern Fujian dialect who married local women of the original stock, speakers of the Austronesian languages then current from Taiwan and the Philippines to Hawaii, New Zealand, and Madagascar. Today, the DNA of Taiwanese descended from these first migrants falls halfway between that of Filipinos and Chinese from Fujian province, just across the Strait.

The political history of the island was likewise distinct. It was the Portuguese who gave it the name “Formosa,” although for a brief period in the mid-17th century it was also controlled by the Dutch. In 1644, numerous loyalists of the Chinese Ming dynasty, fleeing the non-Chinese Manchus, made their way to Taiwan where they ousted the Dutch and continued a successful resistance until 1687, when terms were struck with the Manchu Qing. The Qing, in turn, kept a limited presence on the island, first placing it under the provincial authority of Fujian and then making it a discrete province of their empire in 1885.

But then in 1895 the Manchus, having been utterly defeated by Japan, turned over the island without any compunctions. Under Japanese rule, the Taiwanese did reasonably well; Japanese is still the easiest language for the oldest generation of today’s Taiwanese to speak. Taiwanese conscripts served in the Japanese army in World War II.

On the eve of Japan’s defeat in 1945, few people thought of Taiwan as what today’s Chinese constitution explicitly claims it to be—namely, a province of the People’s Republic. It had Chinese characteristics, to be sure, but its basic character was its own. Although Roosevelt and Churchill had agreed in 1943 that the island should be returned to China, the forces sent by Chiang in 1945 to subdue the place so alienated the locals that riots broke out in early 1947 and had to be put down by fresh troops; several tens of thousands of Taiwanese are thought to have been murdered.

Everything changed when Chiang arrived two years later with about two million of his followers, to continue there the government of the Republic of China just as Ming loyalists had done 300 years earlier. Until his death in 1975, Taiwan experienced autocratic (but not totalitarian) government, accompanied by regular pronouncements to the effect that the city of Taipei was China’s true capital and that Chiang’s party would soon liberate the mainland from the Communists. Mandarin became the obligatory language. In 1953, with U.S.-China relations thoroughly poisoned by the Korean war, Washington concluded a military alliance with

Chiang’s “Republic of China” and helped it to push back a series of challenges from Mao. Radical economic reforms begun in the late 1950’s sparked double-digit economic growth. Today, though ranked 47th in the world in population, Taiwan is the world’s fourteenth largest exporter and sixteenth largest importer, and holds the world’s third largest foreign-exchange reserves.

WHEN THE U.S. undertook its historic “opening” to mainland China in the 1970’s, Presidents Nixon and Ford temporarily managed the Taiwan problem by keeping its ambassador “to” China in Taipei while dispatching another diplomat to serve as ambassador “in” China (where he presided over a “liaison office”). It was not a neat arrangement, but it was dictated by a prudent concern for the security of Taiwan, by then a longtime U.S. ally and a far freer place than the PRC. But in 1979, four years after Chiang’s death and three years after Mao’s, Jimmy Carter, at the urging of close advisers, abruptly broke all official relations, diplomatic and military, with the island. The news was conveyed in the small hours, without warning, by a phone call that woke the president, Chiang Ching-kuo, son of the late Generalissimo.

It was Carter’s ill-considered action that created the unstable situation that has lasted until today. Leaping boldly into uncharted territory—when had any country, except in case of war, utterly severed its official ties with another, in this case a close friend?—the Carter White House imagined it was cutting the Gordian knot of American foreign policy in East Asia. The expectation was that the autocratic government in Taipei would have no alternative but to come to terms with China and would thus disappear as a festering issue in international politics. Many of Carter’s advisers anticipated an interval of no more than four to five years before the island’s aging leaders, reaching over the heads of their disenfranchised people, would accept Premier Deng Xiaoping’s offer of “one country, two systems.” Or, as Carter’s communiqué put it blandly: “The United States expects that the Taiwan issue will be settled peacefully by the Chinese people themselves.”

In the event, not only did this plan fail to be realized but the attempt to execute it created false expectations and enduring mistrust among all three players. In 1982, while President Reagan was still finding his feet on China, Deng Xiaoping held out the prospect of Taiwan’s joining China as a completely autonomous territory,

while also demanding that Washington cease all arms sales to the island. The ensuing negotiations produced another deeply unsatisfactory communiqué in which Beijing assured everyone concerned that its “basic approach” to Taiwan was peaceful and the United States, for its part, promised gradually to reduce arms sales.

The stars were now aligned for Taiwan to play its assigned role. But it declined the part. Deng Xiaoping’s ever-so-polite letter to Chiang Ching-kuo went unanswered. Instead, Chiang, who had studied in the USSR and had begun his career as chief of Taiwan’s secret police, set out on a course that no one in the U.S. had ever considered: democratization. A radically oppositionist Democratic Progressive party was allowed to form in 1987, which also turned out to be the penultimate year of the younger Chiang’s life. Under his hand-picked successor, Lee Teng-hui, all political prisoners were released, exiles began to return, the press was liberated, martial law was abolished—and the government, entirely reconstituted, was made legitimate by elections for both the presidency and the parliament.

AS THE world continued to lecture Taiwan that its only choice was to talk and talk until agreement was reached on its absorption into China, public sentiment on the island began to shift in the other direction. The old “Chinese” self-identification—based in part on cultural tradition, enforced by the Nationalist regime, and seconded by the United States as long as it had an embassy in Taipei—faded. More and more citizens declared themselves “Taiwanese” and began demanding the same rights as any other people—to a state, to independence, to self-government, and all the rest.

China, in the meantime, was still waiting impatiently for its *quid pro quo*. As Beijing read things, Washington had promised to do what was necessary to force Taipei to come to terms. Over the succeeding years, tensions and contradictions grew as the PRC assiduously stamped every vestige of the “Republic of China” out of official international relations—Taiwan was barred not only from the United Nations but from the World Health Organization—while the United States failed to help it either to find some new and acceptable place in the world or to prepare itself realistically for the possibility of Beijing-initiated violence.

And violence did become increasingly possible. Well aware that Taiwan’s people would never freely vote for “peaceful unification,” China’s president Jiang Zemin observed adroitly in 1995

that “if we abandon the threat of force against Taiwan, then it is impossible that peaceful unification will be achieved.” A vast program of military modernization and expansion, begun in 1989 right after the crushing of pro-democracy forces in Tiananmen Square, included the deployment of nearly 500 ballistic missiles directly across from the island and the brandishing of supersonic anti-ship missiles with the ability to sink American aircraft carriers. In recent years, the Chinese military has conducted large-scale amphibious landing exercises on Dongshan, an offshore Chinese island not dissimilar to Taiwan. In the bristling words of Premier Wen Jiabao, China is ready to “pay any price to safeguard the unity of the motherland.”

Such threats, and actions, have been a great headache to Washington. The Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, passed overwhelmingly by a Congress angry with Carter for abandoning an ally, all but committed us to come to Taiwan’s aid in case of conflict, to supply the island with necessary defensive weapons, and to maintain our own capacity to intervene in its defense. As long as China was focused mostly on internal economic development, these words seemed to matter little. Today, with the American and Chinese sides increasingly polarized, and with the vivid example of China’s ham-fisted interventions to keep control of Hong Kong, they matter a great deal.

Like the German naval buildup of the late 19th century that contributed so much to the miscalculations leading to World War I, Chinese military expansion has put all of Asia on edge. The threat is not only to Taiwan, but Taiwan is increasingly the pivot. The strategic reason is obvious: the island lies athwart the most important East Asian sea lanes linking Japan, South Korea, and coastal China to the Middle East, source of the petroleum that drives their economies. The same lanes connect European Russia by sea to its strategically vital Pacific coast, and connect India, which maintains a major presence at the western end of the Straits of Malacca, to East and Southeast Asia. To an ambitious power, they offer a route into the Indian Ocean and beyond.

TODAY’S TAIWAN has no interest in dominating, let alone harming, any of its neighbors; it presides benignly over this crucial maritime route. But what would happen if Taiwan became an operational base for the Chinese military, as Hong Kong has now effectively become? This is a question that few have cared, or dared, to think about realistically.

In May of this year, Singapore's prime minister, Goh Chok-tong, ridiculed the idea of Taiwanese independence, noting that no Asian state supported it and warning Taipei not to cross any "red lines" that might make war with China inevitable. But what would Singapore's own security look like if the People's Liberation Army (PLA) were based in Taiwan? And, a *fortiori*, what about Japan? Although, like the U.S., Japan has never recognized Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan, it has played the same game of make-believe as nearly everyone else and has severed relations with the island. How would Japan, the world's third largest importer of petroleum, view a situation in which the PLA could easily cut *its* energy supplies?

The fact is that the unification of Taiwan and China would severely menace the national-security interests of every Asian state, including especially our democratic friends and allies. Which means that not only justice and international legality but also their, and our, security requires that Taiwan *not* fall under Chinese control.

Yet we ourselves still say we want unification. Our disinclination to reconsider what our interests and those of our allies require was made painfully clear during the month-long run-up to Taiwan's presidential election this past May. The election itself was won by the incumbent, Chen Shuibian of the Democratic Progressive party, who has stressed Taiwan's uniqueness and denied that it is part of China. His opponent was Lien Chan, a former vice president and a stalwart of the Kuomintang or Nationalist party that ruled Taiwan without interruption until Chen's first victory four years ago.

Washington, under pressure from Beijing, made little secret of whom it supported. Lien was seen as the candidate who might lead Taiwan into the Chinese fold, while Chen was portrayed as a headstrong troublemaker whose statements about the identity and aspirations of the people of Taiwan threatened to push Beijing into taking military action and thus drag the United States into war. With China's premier standing beside him, President Bush delivered a vague but unmistakable warning to Chen not to "provoke" Beijing. Meanwhile, in Taipei, our official representative was privately telling visitors that, should Chen win, we might expect war between China and Taiwan within the year.

Chen won—threats have a tendency to backfire—with a majority of just over 50 percent of the vote. The new president's inaugural address

succeeded in pleasing Washington by means of a clear expression of goodwill toward China and an offer to resume unconditional talks (an offer that Beijing promptly dismissed as "insincere"). But the election also revealed how much Taiwan has changed in its nearly two decades of democracy. Polls show that the population, which used to consider itself "Chinese," now regards itself as either "Taiwanese" or "Taiwanese and Chinese." Even in the Kuomintang, the old leaders of Chinese background are being replaced by a younger generation born and raised in Taiwan; their interests and their sense of identity differ little from those of the leadership of the Democratic Progressive party. A consensus has formed that, however the future develops, Taiwan must retain complete control of its own affairs.

Thus, despite the fact that it is standard in Beijing and quite fashionable in Washington to blame cross-strait tensions on President Chen, this misses the point: Chen's views reflect those of the Taiwanese people who elected him. He cannot instruct them to change their minds, nor can he impose any sort of settlement without their approval. Union with China would be possible only if approved by a referendum of all Taiwanese, and every attempt to browbeat them has only strengthened their determination to become masters in their own land. What has happened in Taiwan since the end of the dictatorship is a classic example of how nationalism develops. China and the world's shunning of the Taiwanese has only accelerated and intensified the process.

TO BE fair, Washington is already dealing rather effectively with one horn of the dilemma created by these deeply rooted developments: namely, the problem of maintaining Taiwan's security. Beijing's strategy has long been to attempt to get at Taiwan through Washington—that is, to induce us, by a combination of threats and promises, to abandon our support for the island and thus prepare it for delivery to the PRC.

So far, despite Beijing's success at politicizing what should be purely military decisions, this has not worked. Indeed, in a speech last April, Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly subtly redefined the American position, asserting that America's interest lay in maintaining the peaceful status quo as we defined it, and that neither China nor Taiwan should attempt to change it unilaterally. This was a departure from our standard rhetoric invoking the goal of unification.

Concurrently, the Bush administration has done much to supply needed weapons and training to Taiwan's long-isolated military, as well as to create a strong U.S. strike force at Guam, about a thousand miles away, capable of intervening at very short notice.

The other horn of the dilemma, however, remains a puzzle to all concerned. Even assuming the will to do so, how would we go about restoring the sort of appropriate and full diplomatic relations with Taiwan that are the norm with any other country? The trouble here is that after planning for and expecting Taiwan's demise, we have given away nearly every negotiating card we might once have held—UN membership, for example, which lost by a handful of votes and could have been won with real American backing.

When Henry Kissinger made his first visit to China in 1971, he affirmed that the United States did not seek "two Chinas; one China, one Taiwan; or an independent Taiwan"—which seemed to close all doors save that of union with China. True, Kissinger was also careful to maintain the longstanding American position that the question of Taiwan's sovereignty "remained to be determined." This ambiguity was incorporated in the 1972 Shanghai communiqué and in every official document ever since. Nevertheless, our "one-China policy," which allows us to recognize only one Chinese regime at a time, has imposed crippling restrictions on our diplomacy. (It should be noted that under Chiang Kai-shek, Taipei maintained that it was the legitimate government of China, a claim that has long since been abandoned.)

Even though Taiwan is probably one of our ten most important foreign postings, we and they exchange "representatives," not "ambassadors." The Taiwanese have no embassy in Washington, and no diplomatic status; they cannot display their flag, or enter official U.S. premises. Staffs are far too small to handle real business. Although the Bush administration has been far more hospitable than its predecessors to Taiwan's elected leadership, permitting President Chen a "transit visit" through New York that featured a large public tribute at the Waldorf Astoria, the fact remains that, while the president of Mali can visit Washington and be feted at the White House, the president of Taiwan cannot. Taiwanese diplomats sardonically call our capital the *zijingcheng*, the "forbidden city."

Diplomacy serves a purpose. If we are unhappy with certain assertions by our ally Chen Shuibian, president of one of the most important states in East Asia, might it not make sense to give him a dinner at the White House, followed by a visit to the family

quarters and then the necessary talk? But we forbid ourselves such powerful tools, instead voicing our complaints indirectly, through intermediaries, over great distances. Not even at the height of the cold war did we treat the leadership of our enemies with such self-defeating disrespect as we treat the leadership of our Taiwanese friends.

WHAT THEN should we do? Many in Washington still instinctively blame Taiwan and Chen for any tensions with China, arguing in the standard phrase that "Taiwan must be put in a box." But they are wrong, both in their facts and in their conclusions.

The first home truth that must be absorbed is that "peaceful reunification" is not going to happen. It is a fantasy to imagine that the same PRC that bloodily crushed its own democracy movement in 1989 and is now seeking to discard the promises it made to Hong Kong can somehow peacefully convince the people of Taiwan to join it. Were China itself to become democratic and free, the danger of war in the Strait would be dissipated, and a political arrangement, including possibly some sort of affiliation or federation, could be reached through negotiation. But even with a democratic China, it is highly probable that Taiwan would reject the idea of unification, preferring instead to remain a good neighbor.

But it is also a fantasy—and this is the second home truth—to imagine that the PRC has a viable military option for bringing the people of Taiwan to heel. The United States has insisted from the start that any change must be peaceful, and we are prepared to defend Taiwan if necessary. Moreover, the current Beijing leadership may underestimate the strength of the Taiwanese themselves. American experts have developed plausible scenarios in which an attempted Chinese amphibious assault is repelled in a rout, using relatively simple capabilities that Taiwan either already possesses or is acquiring. At least one high Chinese military official seems to agree: Liu Yazhou, the one PRC general who has actually visited Taiwan. In an essay widely circulated on the Internet in China, General Liu has warned that, while invincible on land, the PLA has never won a battle at sea. He has also offered the prudent observation that "in a future war against Taiwan, given its geostrategic significance to the U.S., it would be the whole Western world defending Taiwan."

For China, the obvious and easy way to avoid the kind of war of which Liu warns would be to reach a genuine negotiated settlement that would finally confer upon Taiwan the international status it deserves. Why, then, has no one in Beijing thus far

shown any interest in this option? The reason has to do not with us or the Taiwanese. Nor is it a symptom of some deep Chinese obsession with sovereignty, as some have argued. Mongolia, occupying 600,000 very strategic square miles, joined the Qing empire even before China itself did, and long before Taiwan, and remained part of that empire to the end; today its independence is recognized by Beijing, and is certainly no sticking point in our diplomatic relations.

Although leaders in Beijing are clearly unsettled by the development of democracy and a new sense of identity in Taiwan, their obsession with the island has little to do with external factors and far more to do with the tense political situation in China itself. Ever since the 1989 Tiananmen massacre, the problem for China has been the illegitimacy of its *own* government. That murderous incident and its legacy are the unspoken subtext of much political activity in today's PRC.

The order to sack Beijing in 1989 came from an irregularly convened conclave of Communist-party elders. The same group placed the country's legal leader, Zhao Ziyang, under house arrest (where he remains) and, in complete violation not only of the Chinese constitution but also of the party's own rules, named a new leadership, first Jiang Zemin and then Hu Jintao. The latter is now in theory China's president, but the former has been unwilling to give up his power. Increasing the tension over Taiwan serves Jiang's interest, reinforcing the argument that he must remain chairman of the central military commission and that his own protégé, Zeng Qinghong, would be a fitting replacement for President Hu Jintao. Under these circumstances, both Hu and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao are compelled to take at least as hard a line.

SO LONG as China remains a dictatorship, and so long as it remains engaged in a threatening military buildup—Jiang Zemin has adopted dangerously provocative policies not only toward Taiwan but toward Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines, the Koreas, and others—the danger will exist that it may start a war in East Asia. The way to prevent this is by deterrence. The United States cannot deter China alone, nor should it. But an alliance of democratic states, politically and militarily strong, could do so—while also helping to provide the time and perhaps the incentive for China to change internally.

Our goal should be gradually to discard our confused 30-year-old policy and cultivate a sub-

stantial entente of the democratic states in East Asia. This would involve adjusting our existing treaties with, for example, Japan and South Korea, making them genuinely equal partners. It would also involve regular multilateral meetings and concrete steps to ensure some degree of diplomatic coordination, secure communications, and the interoperability of weapons systems in case of war. In and around Taiwan itself, we should be increasing our military and political presence. Above all, we should be working actively to help the island find an appropriate and functional place in the world.

Would this, as some warn, increase tensions all the more, risk destroying our relationship with China, or so alarm Beijing that it would have “no choice” but to start a suicidal war? Not in the least. Although the failure of Taiwan to disappear is clearly an irritant to the Chinese, the basic source of tension in the Taiwan Strait is, to repeat, internal Chinese political rivalry. As for our relationship with Beijing, it centers mostly on trade, and the terms are by no means favorable to the United States or to the free countries whose workers cannot compete effectively with China's “disciplined” labor force. War would close the overseas markets upon which China's economy depends. Finally, to initiate any sort of offensive action would be militarily perilous for China, as some Chinese leaders like General Liu understand. The alternatives are much more attractive, and could be made to seem even more so by forthright and effective diplomacy. Why, after all, should China not strike a deal and, instead of risking general war, permit itself to get on with the business of raising its own living standards?

Ultimately, the task of defending Taiwan is up to the people of Taiwan and their government. They are the ones who must undertake the initiatives and allocate the funds necessary to develop the offensive and defensive capabilities they require. But the United States clearly has a role to play, and work to do. A fragile peace and an increasing prosperity have existed across the Taiwan Strait for more than 50 years. Taiwan's successful democratization is, moreover, a powerful example to the rest of Asia, China not least. All of these achievements will be jeopardized if the current obsolete framework governing our East Asian relations is not reconstructed from first principles, and soon.