

Taiwan's history - and destiny - of freedom from China

Democratic nations must stand up for Taiwan's right to determine its own future without China's military threats.

By Bruce Jacobs

TAIPEI, TAIWAN

The recent close mayoral elections in Taipei and Kaohsiung, Taiwan's two largest cities, remind us that Taiwan remains a thriving democracy. Along with South Korea, Taiwan is one of two former Asian dictatorships that have made a true transition to democratic rule.

This democratization has won Taiwan many friends around the world, including the United States, Australia, Japan, and Britain. But this support doesn't change the fact that Taiwan faces a severe threat from China.

At this moment, China has more than 800 missiles aimed at the island. Its military often conducts exercises relevant to an invasion of Taiwan. That kind of power makes some observers in government, business, and academic circles wary of upsetting China. Yet China has shown that it respects strong, principled stands rather than a submissive, begging attitude.

The US and other democratic nations must stand up for Taiwan's right to determine its own future without China's military threats. Taking this stand means welcoming Taiwan's representation in more international organizations - and yes, rethinking their approach toward the so-called One-China policy, which declares Taiwan to be part of China.

China's bogus historical claims

China claims Taiwan as its own even though the People's Republic of China has never controlled the island.

Even Chinese Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong, in his interview with Edgar Snow on July 16, 1936, made very clear that Taiwan should be independent.

Historically, Taiwan belonged to China only during the short period between 1945 and 1949, when the Chinese Nationalists occupied the island and killed some 20,000 Taiwanese who demonstrated for democracy. The Ching Dynasty, which ruled parts of Taiwan from 1683 to 1895 was Manchu, not Chinese. At that time, China, too, was a Manchu colony.

The One-China policy is unfair to Taiwan - and it forces nations that want to keep relations with both China and Taiwan to walk a diplomatic tightrope. That's why Taiwan's allies need to revise their policies toward China and Taiwan.

Take the US. Like many nations, it has two large "officially unofficial" diplomatic missions in Taiwan, while Taiwan has many missions in America. Both sides enjoy diplomatic privileges such as immunity and tax waivers. With its Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, which treats Taiwan as a state, the US has partially overcome the One-China policy. But many US bureaucrats still treat Taiwan as inferior. And many US allies have accepted the claim that the island is a province of China.

In international relations, one of the closest parallels to Taiwan is East Timor, although Taiwan is much more prosperous and maintains a vigorous democracy. Only with the fall of Indonesian President Suharto in 1998 - after nearly a quarter century of oppressive military rule - did the East Timorese people gain the right to vote on their future, choosing independence and freedom overwhelmingly.

While East Timor was controlled by Indonesia, China criticized such "splittist" movements as the call for East Timorese independence. But after East Timor's referendum, China was the very first nation to recognize its independence. The parallels between Taiwan and East Timor, as well as China's support of East Timor's independence, need more emphasis in international relations.

Give Taiwan greater representation

The US must continue to work closely with other interested nations - such as Australia, Japan, Canada, and European countries - to give Taiwan international standing, such as observer status, or even membership, in the World Health Organization (WHO). Disease does not recognize borders and Taiwan has suffered from not having proper representation in this forum. The 2003 SARS outbreak, for example, killed many more people than necessary in Taiwan because of the slow international response. China's claim that it can represent Taiwan in WHO has repeatedly proved to be false.

Taiwan should also be integrated into a variety of international forums and activities. The island has formal diplomatic relations with the Solomon Islands and gives significant aid. It would help the Solomon Islands as well as donor nations if Taiwan's aid could be integrated into the multilateral aid efforts that include the US, Australia, and Japan. Such efforts could be replicated elsewhere.

Taiwan should also be welcomed into the Australia Group, which seeks to assure that industries in the 38 member countries do not assist states that try to acquire chemical and biological weapons.

Despite a mirage of leadership unity, China has considerable debates about its Taiwan policies. Taiwan investment makes a considerable contribution to China's current economic boom and to China's economic reforms. A Chinese takeover of Taiwan would endanger many of these efforts. Many Chinese welcome Taiwan's bold freedom of speech and the press, as well as the ability of its judiciary to indict executive-branch VIPs. A Chinese takeover would suppress these freedoms.

Polls show that the number of people in Taiwan who consider themselves Chinese has declined from 25 percent of the population in 1992 to about 6 percent now. A world that increasingly values self-determination would be a much safer place if China would renounce its false historical claim on Taiwan.

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