



Cross-Strait Relations in a New International Setting

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An analysis of the international implications of the Taiwan question with a special view to Sino–U.S. relations

Fundamentally speaking, the Taiwan question is an internal issue between the Chinese on the two sides of the Taiwan Strait. However, there are new and more complicated factors involved. On the island of Taiwan the proindependence forces are gathering momentum, and the identity issue is becoming more prominent. The leadership in Taiwan is trying to use the so-called democracy issue to achieve its purpose of independence. Besides, in the age of globalization, regional integration, and information, the Taiwan question increasingly involves international factors as well.

There are many ways to look at the Taiwan question. But here the author is trying to analyze its international implications with a special view to Sino–U.S. relations. Generally speaking, the international community is supportive of the “one-China” formula to tackle the Taiwan question and is opposed to “Taiwan independence” for its disruptive and disastrous consequences. However, the U.S. Taiwan policy is dual in nature, and the Taiwan question continues to develop into a more complicated situation. Therefore, many difficulties and uncertainties line the road ahead. Because of these complications, the parties concerned are not only talking about peaceful solutions but are also developing military preparations in case the worst scenario materializes.

I. The Taiwan Election and International Reactions

On March 20, 2004, Taiwan had an election, and Mr. Chen Shui-bian was reelected amid the

great mystery of the shooting incident and the controversy of his slim margin of victory.

Mr. Chen’s reelection made Cross-Strait political and security relations even more tense and serious. In the opinion of the Chinese mainland, Mr. Chen is further departing from his previously made commitments and promises on Cross-Strait relations such as “the five no’s” and “one China under the ROC constitution.” On the island of Taiwan, the relationship of powers between the DPP and the KMT-FPP coalition is tilting in favor of the former. The KMT-FPP coalition is facing grave postdefeat challenges such as intra- and interparty unity, which is eroding public support. The coalition is also finding fewer means of leverage to check on the ruling party. Owing to a variety of reasons, the so-called Taiwan identity is gathering momentum. Even among those who favor the status quo are those who are no longer ready to criticize the proindependence forces and support unification. There exists a possibility that the Taiwanese who call for managing their own affairs will follow a proindependence trend.

Despite these serious challenges, some basics remain unchanged. First, the Chinese mainland will continue to pursue peaceful unification while firmly opposing so-called Taiwan independence. Cross-Strait economic, cultural, and personal exchanges continue to grow, constituting a strong force in containing the separatists, for they prefer more stable and predictable Cross-Strait relations. Economic globalization and regional integration exert great pressure on Taiwan authorities for a closer economic relationship to avoid self-imposed isolation and marginalization.

The international community closely watched the election in Taiwan on March 20, 2004, for the following reasons. First, long before this election the ruling party, the DPP, and its leader, Mr. Chen Shui-bian, tried every means to turn this election from deliberating on domestic issues into a debate on separation from or unification with the Chinese mainland. Mr. Chen Shui-bian spared no efforts in attacking the Chinese mainland and cooked up one formula after another to divert voters' attention to the separation–unification issue. Separation–unification touches on the sensitive nerve centers of sovereignty and territorial integrity with grave consequences internationally.

Second, the international community fully understood that if Mr. Chen's aim was met, it would surely invite turbulence or even military conflicts in the Cross-Strait area, thus disrupting the peace and stability of the Asian Pacific region. Therefore, the international community formed an informal coalition to check on Mr. Chen Shui-bian's referendum, which targeted separation. Both before and after the election, countries like the United States, Japan, EU countries, and Asian countries repeatedly appealed for maintaining the status quo over Cross-Strait relations.

Third, the international community had many doubts about the honesty and credibility of the election because of the shooting incident on the eve of the election and the measures taken by Mr. Chen. The international community is also closely watching the recounting processes and other follow-up legal procedures. These suspicions and uncertainties have still not been answered.

Last, the international community has repeatedly shown its firm standing opposition to the Taiwan authorities' attempt to edge into international organizations that require statehood such as the United Nations and the World Health Organization (WHO). Prior to and after the election in Taiwan, the international community reaffirmed its "one-China" policy and opposition to "Taiwan's independence." In a rare joint communiqué at the end of Premier Wen Jiabao's visit

to Germany, the host gave explicit support to the "one-China" policy, voiced strong opposition to "Taiwan's independence," and criticized Taiwan leaders' attempt to change the status quo.¹ Premier Wen's other hosts such as the European Union, Italy, and Great Britain also expressed their continued support for the "one-China" policy.² Politically and diplomatically, the international community has repeatedly shown its general support for the "one-China" principle and stands together with the Chinese mainland against "Taiwan independence."

II. China's Position and Countermeasures

The Chinese mainland's position toward this election has been measured but firm. Prior to the election, the Chinese mainland refrained from commenting directly on the election and mainly let the voters on the island decide which leader they would like to elect. After the election and facing a second term of the proindependence DPP authorities, the Chinese mainland decided to do the following.

The Chinese mainland, through its Taiwan Affairs Office, described the current state of relations across the Taiwan Strait as severely tested and advocated putting a resolute check on "Taiwan independence" activities aimed at dismembering China and threatening peace and stability in the Taiwan Straits. That, it maintained, is the most pressing task that faces compatriots on both sides of the Straits.³ It should be pointed out that this stern statement was issued on May 17, 2004, three days before Mr. Chen's inauguration. The Chinese mainland has certainly changed its position of "listening to Chen's words and watching his deeds" during his first term. This change has shown that the Chinese mainland has come to the conclusion that Mr. Chen is an incurable separatist who has no credibility at all.

As indicated by explicit words and actual deeds, the Chinese mainland is preparing for the

worst. Although it is still expressing its resolve to do its utmost with maximum sincerity to strive for the peaceful unification of the motherland, its emphasis is more on crushing “Taiwan independence” schemes at any cost.⁴ Increasing signs show that the Chinese mainland is exerting pressure on proindependence forces by stepping up military preparations, economic squeezing, and media criticism. The Chinese government has made it known to the international community that in order to safeguard China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, it would even bear any sacrifice and cost, including the Olympics 2008.⁵

Moreover, Chinese public opinion has called for firmer attitudes and stronger resolve by the Chinese government to defeat “Taiwan’s independence” attempts. Many scholars and young intellectuals are demanding a thorough review of the mainland’s Cross-Strait policy in the past quarter century and advocating the establishment of a new strategy tailored to the present situation. Newspapers less controlled in quantity are full of indignation and emotional headlines and stories against “Taiwan’s independence.” Mounting pressure is evident on the Internet, as is the self-sponsored boycott of proindependent Taiwanese businesses and entertainment.

Both the Chinese government and people have shown greater frustration and opposition toward an increasingly closer U.S.–Taiwan relationship. The Chinese government is pressing the United States to promise to adhere to the “one-China” policy by matching explicit words with concrete deeds, especially no arms sales to Taiwan. Chinese leaders sternly and directly warned visiting Security Adviser Rice about the grave consequences of U.S. military ties with Taiwan.⁶ The Chinese People’s Liberation Army launched a large-scale military exercise in the Dongshan Islands area showing China’s resolve to defeat any attempt to dismember the country. Many scholars and experts in the Chinese foreign policy community have increasingly criticized the United States for giving wrong signals to Mr. Chen Shui-bian favoring his proindependence maneuvering. Some of them hold that it would be better to con-

tain “Taiwan’s independence” by military means earlier rather than later.⁷

In early July 2004 Mr. Lee Hsien Loong, vice premier and premier designate of Singapore, paid a “private” visit to Taiwan, which aroused strong reaction from China. Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokewoman Zhang Qiyue warned that this visit damaged China’s core national interests and shook the political base for Sino–Singaporean relations.⁸ Later on the Chinese government canceled the planned visit by Governor Zhou Xiaochuan of the Chinese Central Bank. This strong reaction once again showed that the Chinese government means what it says on the Taiwan question. Mr. Lee’s visit and its serious consequences have been noted throughout the world.

III. Meeting the Challenges

In the new situation involving Taiwan, China and the United States are faced with many grave challenges. One is U.S.–Taiwan military relations. The United States is continually upgrading its military ties with Taiwan, which is contrary to the three communiqués between China and the United States on the Taiwan question and to the repeatedly affirmed Bush administration’s nonsupportive position against Taiwan independence.

On the whole, China and the United States have common interests in and grounds for maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait area and keeping the Taiwan question under control. The Chinese mainland is doing its best to strive for the best and prepare for the worst. On the one hand, despite the fact that the Taiwan question is worsening and the separatists there are quickening their steps toward “Taiwan independence” by proposing a timetable and making trouble all the time, the Chinese leadership is still doing its best to bring about a stable and predictable Cross-Strait relationship at present and peaceful unification as the fulfillment of its ultimate goal. It is sparing no efforts to promote

Cross-Strait relations by relying more on soft power to win over the hearts and minds of Taiwanese compatriots. On the other hand, it is showing its determination to defend the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity. On the domestic front the Chinese government is seeking to strengthen its home base, and externally it is striving to secure the international community's cooperation against "Taiwan's independence." By doing so, the Chinese government hopes to avoid or at least postpone a showdown of force on the Taiwan question.

The domestic situation in Taiwan is still evolving. The Legislative Yuan election will take place in December 2004, and fierce competition is expected. This parliamentary election will again determine the further development of Taiwan's politics and basic attitudes toward relations with the Chinese mainland. However, it is of general concern that under Mr. Chen Shui-bian and the DPP, the pace for "Taiwan's independence" will be further quickened.

Although it constitutes the friendliest one toward Taiwan, the Bush administration still feels uneasy and frustrated because of Mr. Chen Shui-bian's continual trouble making and boat rocking. It has warned Mr. Chen Shui-bian not to challenge the ultimate red line of sovereign issues related to "one China." The U.S. presidential election this year has so far focused on antiterrorism, the issue of Iraq, and the domestic economy. Neither candidate wants to be distracted by the Taiwan question. It is generally believed that no matter who goes to the White House, U.S. policy toward Taiwan will largely remain unchanged. But the United States still clings to the Taiwan Relations Act and continues to sell more sophisticated and advanced weapons to Taiwan. The U.S. Congress even passed a resolution in July calling for upgrading U.S.-Taiwan military ties. Instead of re-examining its self-contradictory policy toward Taiwan, some political forces in the United States are trying to blame the current tense situation concerning the Taiwan Strait on the so-called China threat.

Therefore, the most urgent job for the two countries is to prevent the Taiwan question from worsening and becoming uncontrollable. It would especially involve deterring Mr. Chen Shui-bian's attempt to achieve *de jure* independence. The Chinese side has made it clear to both the United States and Taiwan authorities that China will have to use all the means necessary and available to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Through various channels the United States has warned the Taiwanese side not to provoke and corner the Americans into choosing sides. It is also openly opposing any attempt to revise Taiwan's constitution on sovereignty-related issues.

China and the United States are also working in parallel to urge the Taiwanese side to reopen Cross-Strait dialogue. The Chinese side has clearly expressed its readiness to participate as long as the Taiwanese side recognizes the "one-China" principle. During my recent visit to the United States in June and July, I observed that the American side had become more interested in consulting with the Chinese over the Taiwan question and in urging Cross-Strait dialogue.⁹ It was also reported that the Bush administration had offered its facilitation for Cross-Strait dialogue and communication during Dr. Rice's July visit to Beijing.

Economic and trade relations and people-to-people exchanges continue to play a positive role in promoting Cross-Strait relations. Some of the think tanks in Washington, D.C., suggested various kinds of proposals ranging from realizing direct flight between Shanghai and Taipei to more business cooperation. Some American transnationals even threatened to move out of Taiwan if direct flight is delayed infinitely.

More serious dangers loom in the mid- and long term. There are too many unknown factors in future Cross-Strait and Sino-U.S. relations. In Washington, D.C., there is a force supporting and even encouraging "Taiwan independence." The neoconservatives are talking about waging a war against the Chinese mainland over Taiwan. The Pentagon and the commander, U.S. Pacific Com-

mand (CDRUSPACOM), are believed to have finished the relevant planning.¹⁰ In many published U.S. military documents, advocates have proposed possible military conflicts with the Chinese mainland over the Taiwan question.

The differences between China and the United States over the question of Taiwan must be viewed in a broader perspective. While growing and developing into a world-class major power, China needs many years to flourish in a peaceful and favorable international environment. That includes maintaining stable and healthy relations with the United States. Furthermore, the relationship will be based on the long process that enables a rising power to achieve peaceful coexistence with an established power. Some traditional thinking asserts an inevitable conflict between these two powers and therefore considers the Taiwan question a good check on China's rising. But China is looking for an alternative. It wants to solve its reunification issue through a gradual process of economic integration and political convergence. Therefore, China hopes that the United States will work to achieve a win-win result that benefits all parties concerned.

China and the United States share interests in maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait area. The two countries should pursue further cooperation in containing "Taiwan independence" by more feasible and workable measures. In the meantime, the strategists and policymakers should seek mid- and long-term cooperation to prevent possible conflicts and create better opportunities for Cross-Strait cooperation.

The Taiwan question has existed for a long time and will not be easily solved. There is a possibility of a military confrontation between China and the United States resulting from mishandling or miscalculation. That is why the Chinese mainland has over and over again warned the United States not to send wrong signals to Taiwan. It is to be hoped that Mr. Chen Shui-bian has received

the message and does not slide down the fatal road of "Taiwan independence."

About the Author

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Notes

1. China-Germany Joint Communique," *People's Daily*, May 5, 2004, 3.
2. *People's Daily*, May 8, 2004, 3; May 10, 2004, 3; May 11, 2004, 3.
3. "Putting a Check on 'Taiwan Independence,' a Pressing Task," *China Daily*, May 17, 2004, 1.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Author's discussion with Dr. Henry Kissinger and Senior Minister Lee Kwang Ywe, Beijing, June 18, 2004.
6. Chinese Military Commission Chairman Jiang Zemin and Chinese President Hu Jintao met with Rice on July 8 and 9, 2004, *People's Daily*, July 9 and 10, 2004, 1.
7. For instance, Professor Yan Xuetong at Tsinghua University strongly holds this view. *Huanqiu* (Globe), July 16, 2004, www.XINHUANET.com.
8. *People's Daily*, July 12, 2004, 4.
9. The author conducted several dozens of interviews and discussions with U.S. government officials, members of Congress and their staffs, think tank people, and academics in Washington, D.C., New York City, and Boston between June 21 and July 10, 2004. For understandable reasons, the author has to omit the identities of the interviewees.
10. The author's discussion with a retired rear admiral in Washington, D.C., July 1, 2004.

