



New Dimensions of U.S.–Taiwan Relations*

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A telling analysis of the rise of Taiwanese identity and its implications for Cross-Strait relations.

On March 20, 2004, President Chen Shui-bian won reelection by a margin of 29,518 votes, or 0.22 percent, of the 13 million ballots cast. In 2000 President Chen won office in a three-way contest with 39.3 percent of the vote. Four years later, Chen was reelected with 50.1 percent of the vote—an increase of 1.5 million votes. Chen believed that he won this election because “there is a rising Taiwan identity and it has been solidified.”¹ He thought Beijing authorities should take heed of this fact and accept reality. What are the implications of this election for future U.S.–Taiwan–China relations?

Taiwan’s Native Identity

A survey of the *United Daily News* in October 2003 found that 62 percent of respondents said that they were Taiwanese. In 1989 only 16 percent said that they were Taiwanese, whereas 52 percent identified themselves as Chinese. But in 2003 only 19 percent of respondents said they were Chinese.² Several factors are driving this transformation.

Natural Evolution

Since 1895, when the Qing Dynasty ceded Taiwan to Japan, Taiwan and mainland China had only four years (1945–1949) of temporary union but 105 years of separation. Taiwan’s past hardships could not be controlled by people in Taiwan, but with history’s natural evolution, the island gradually developed a Taiwan-centered

consciousness that is beyond the reach of outsiders. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the international community should respect the natural development of Taiwan’s native identity.

China’s Missiles Threats

According to the July 2003 “U.S. Report on the Military Power of the People’s Republic of China,” China had approximately 450 short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) in its deployed inventory. This number is expected to increase by more than 75 missiles per year.

The accuracy and lethality of this force also are increasing.³ Although it professes a preference for resolving the Taiwan issue peacefully, Beijing is also seeking credible military options. China’s ambitious military modernization program may reflect an increasing willingness to consider the use of force to achieve unification.⁴

China’s missile tests in 1995–1996 created a lasting resentment in Taiwan. China’s buildup of missiles and its military threats have further alienated many Taiwanese.

Diplomatic Isolation

A November 22, 1971, U.S. State Department confidential document states the following:

Paradoxically, the PRC’s insistence on the Albanian formula as its means for entering the UN may be seen in the future as a major step in breaking the remaining bond between the island of

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Taiwan and China. Had both the PRC and the Republic of China (ROC) continued to be represented in the UN under the general rubric of “China,” the concept of eventual reunification might have remained stronger than will now be the case. In this sense, the PRC and those who voted for the Albanian Resolution at New York may have contributed greatly to increasing the pace of Taiwan’s evolution toward a separate identity.⁵

In 1971 Beijing used a zero-sum approach to exclude the Republic of China’s representation at the United Nations. After 30 years of evolution, the PRC has continued to use a zero-sum method to circumscribe and suppress Taiwan’s international living space. Taiwan has developed a popular trend and a powerful force of self-identity. As the U.S. State Department predicted 33 years ago, Beijing and its supporters actually contributed to that trend.

In the spring of 2003, Taiwan went through a terrible battle against the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic. Health officials in Taiwan had to rely on the Internet to find effective measures to control the spread of the virus that originated in China.

Taiwan’s exclusion from the World Health Organization (WHO) vastly complicated its efforts to deal with the spread of the disease. In May 2003 Taiwan launched its seventh annual bid to join the WHO as an observer. The United States and Japan supported Taiwan’s WHO bid, but Beijing fiercely opposed it.

After Taiwan failed to win admission to the WHO, one PRC ambassador made a callous comment: “The bid is rejected. Who cares about your Taiwan?”—the final straw that deeply hurt people’s feelings in Taiwan. These circumstances prompted President Chen to call for a referendum to garner support from Taiwan’s people to join the WHO. Political suppression and diplomatic isolation can only drive Taiwan further from the PRC.

U.S. State Department Assistant Secretary James Kelly stated on April 21, 2004, that the PRC actively lobbied to block even the consideration of Taiwan’s observership on the WHO agenda. Kelly correctly pointed out that “this is a mistake that only alienates the people of Taiwan.”⁶

If the PRC does not want to increase the pace of Taiwan’s identity, it should stop the isolation strategy and think about constructive ways to bring about Taiwan’s return to the international community.

Different Political Systems

As Taiwan has become a full democracy, its people have developed a new pride in their political system and an appreciation of their own culture. Taiwanese have fought for their freedom for many years and do not want to surrender their democratic way of life to the PRC—a communist regime with one of the worst human rights records in the world.

According to a poll conducted April 23–25, 2004, by the ROC Mainland Affairs Council, 80.8 percent of respondents rejected the “one-country, two-systems” formula; only 8.3 percent considered it acceptable.⁷ The ROC Mainland Affairs Council’s polls also show that the vast majority of Taiwanese (84.4 percent) prefer to maintain the status quo.⁸

According to Beijing’s “one-China” principle, Taiwan should accept the one-country, two-systems formula, making Taiwan into a second Hong Kong and another special administrative regime of the PRC—a formula totally unacceptable to the people of Taiwan.

When Hong Kong reverted from British administration to Chinese rule in 1997, the PRC promised a one-country, two-systems governance that would ensure a “high degree of autonomy” for 50 years. The Hong Kong Basic Law holds out the possibility that Hong Kong residents can elect their next leader in 2007 and all lawmakers by 2008.

On April 6, 2004, the Standing Committee of the Chinese National People's Congress ruled, however, that no moves to change Hong Kong's election laws could be started without prior approval from Beijing—a ruling that violates the spirit of the Basic Law. On April 26, 2004, the Chinese People's Congress Standing Committee further decided that “universal suffrage shall not apply” to the selection of the next chief executive in 2007 or members of the Legislative Council the following year.⁹

On May 5, 2004, eight PRC warships visited Hong Kong's Victoria Harbor for the first time since 1997. The People's Liberation Army described the visit as simply an occasion to honor the navy's 55th anniversary. But there was no such visit for the 50th anniversary in 1999.¹⁰ The rare show of force came as the people in Hong Kong who favored popular elections found themselves under growing intimidation. Beijing leaders tightened controls in Hong Kong after a series of developments that began with a march by 50,000 people on July 1, 2003, to protest stringent internal-security legislation—Article 23 of the Basic Law.

People in Taiwan, conversely, can freely and directly elect their president and members of the Legislative Yuan. Yet it is still unthinkable for people in Hong Kong and mainland China to elect their leaders directly. Taiwan has achieved full democracy. Taiwanese identity has grown in concert with the progress of democracy in Taiwan.

President Chen Shui-bian believes that the failure of one country, two systems in Hong Kong has also contributed to the rise of Taiwan identity and awareness.¹¹ China's bullying and zero-sum approach to Taiwan have proved to be counterproductive and need to be rethought. Beijing needs to reckon with the rise of a separate Taiwanese identity.

A separate Taiwanese identity or culture does not, however, preclude the possibility of Taiwan's eventual unification with China. Chen has stated his belief that the so-called one China does not exist now but may become a reality in the future. From Taipei's perspective, one China is an issue,

not a precondition, for Cross Strait negotiation. President Chen said in an interview on March 29, 2004, “We shall all be able to sit together and deal with the future one-China issue together.”¹²

What Is the Status Quo?

Both Taiwan and the United States wish to maintain the status quo, but what really is the “status quo”? Who should define the status quo?

From 1950 to 1978, the United States considered the status quo as the ROC representing the legitimate government of China. In 1979 the United States drastically changed its policies and recognized the PROC as the only legitimate government representing China. The United States acted in terms of its own national interests but opted for a completely opposite expression of the status quo.

The ROC and the PROC have coexisted side by side for more than half a century, and this reality cannot be denied regardless of how Beijing or Washington defines the status quo.

On April 21, 2004, Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly stated that “the U.S. does not support independence for Taiwan or unilateral moves that would change the status quo as we define it.”¹³

According to Alan Romberg, the Bush administration views the status quo as “a state of peace and stability in the Strait and believes that maintaining it requires that no party seek unilaterally to press its definition of sovereignty on others.”¹⁴

When he was secretary of state, Henry Kissinger stated, however, that peace could not be made the objective of foreign policy but is a bonus that follows from a properly conceived and intelligently executed policy. Kissinger argued that in any international system where peace is the primary objective, every state within the system is at the mercy of the most ruthless as there is a maximum incentive to mollify the most aggressive state and to accept its demands even when they are unreasonable. Such situations can

only produce massive instability and insecurity.¹⁵

Concerning U.S. policy toward Israeli settlements and Palestinian refugees, a “senior administration official” of the Bush administration stated in mid-April 2004 that “Eliminating taboos and saying the truth about the situation is, we think, a contribution toward peace. Getting people to face reality in this situation is going to help, not hurt.”¹⁶ Such a U.S. posture is equally pertinent to Taiwan’s situation.

The ROC has been a sovereign state since 1912. Taiwan is not a renegade province of the PRC. Under its one-China principle, Beijing has attempted to force Taipei to accept a politically inferior position in Cross Strait negotiation. The international community has become accustomed to Beijing’s pronouncements and has disregarded the fact of separate and equal rule on the two sides of the Taiwan Strait. It is time for the PRC as well as other countries to face reality and to end the illusion that Taiwan should succumb to PRC intimidation.

Constitutional Reform

The United States has expressed concern over President Chen’s plan to draft a new constitution in 2006 to be effective in 2008. Chen has pledged to pursue constitutional reform on the basis of maintaining the status quo. In addition, Chen will continue to honor his “four no’s plus one” commitment of May 20, 2000, if the PRC has no intention to use force against Taiwan.

The current constitution was promulgated in 1947 by the Kuomintang (KMT) and was designed for China and not for Taiwan. It includes a three-tier government, bicameralism, and special rules on “regional ethnic groups.” These provisions, when applied to Taiwan, are difficult to implement because Taiwan does not need a three-tier government and has no regional ethnic groups.

Constitutional reform aims to deal with the following issues:

- Should legislative reform include a

single district, two-vote system?

- Should the number of legislative seats be cut in half?
- Should there be a presidential system or semipresidential system?
- Should the Legislative Yuan regain the power to approve the premier?
- Should a task-specific National Assembly be removed?
- Should there be a relative majority or absolute majority in presidential elections? Three-branch or five-branch separation of powers?
- Should Taiwan’s provincial government be completely abolished or reinstated?
- Should the voting age be lowered from 20 to 18?
- Should there be voluntary or compulsory military service?
- Should there be a referendum for the constitutional amendment procedure?
- Should there be basic human rights and care for the disadvantaged?
- Should there be a national economy provision?¹⁷

These issues do not have any bearing on independence or the unification issue; nor will the constitutional reform effort violate Chen’s four no’s plus one commitment.

Since 1991, Taiwan has made six constitutional revisions, but many problems remain unresolved. A new constitution would aim to reform the parliament and improve government by settling disputes that in the past have left Taiwan’s government grid-locked. The new constitution aims to deepen democratic reform and would have nothing to do with Taiwan’s independence. The constitutional reform will not deal with any offi-

cial name change or territorial issue. Chen stated in an interview with *The Washington Post* that “our future efforts at re-engineering our constitution and constitutional reforms will be only done on the principle of not changing the status quo.”¹⁸

The U.S. Role

Given the continuing confrontation between the two sides of the Taiwan Straits, the international community has been ever hopeful for a resumption of Cross Strait dialogue that would lead to the peaceful resolution of long-standing differences over the maintenance of peace and stability in East Asia. As a leader in the international community, the United States closely monitors policy changes in Beijing and Taipei but appears unaware of its own subtle yet intimate and influential position in Cross Strait relations.

- An increase in important concessions made by the United States to the PRC regarding Taiwan would increase the likelihood of an impasse in Cross Strait negotiations, as such concessions would decrease the PRC’s motivation to negotiate directly with Taiwan. Accordingly, the PRC would tend to consider it easier and more fruitful to deal with the United States instead.
- As the PRC gains more compromises from the international community with regard to Taiwan, the more legitimacy the PRC is likely to believe it has over Taiwan, thus reinforcing a perception that Beijing is the “central” government and Taiwan is a “local” government, and hence the PRC has the right to use force against Taiwan.
- The more successful the PRC becomes in using the one-China principle to isolate Taiwan from the international community, the more resentment the Tai-

wanese people will feel toward the one-China principle.

- As the international community continues to ignore or deny the legitimacy of the ROC, the Taiwanese people will increasingly attempt to gain recognition for themselves by changing the country’s name to “Taiwan.”
- The greater the number of missiles with which China threatens Taiwan, the more likely Taiwan will respond politically to preclude a potential military conflict—a “peace referendum” is one example.
- The more firmly and consistently the United States insists on a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue, the more the PRC is likely to act with restraint toward Taiwan.

The United States plays a pivotal role in U.S.–Taiwan–China dynamics, and its posture will directly affect Cross Strait relations. Taiwan’s destiny became irrevocably linked to the United States when President Franklin D. Roosevelt decided to return Taiwan to the ROC in 1943. Even though the United States has repeatedly asserted that it does not want to play the “middle man” in Cross Strait relations, it can play an important role as a “balancer” and “facilitator.” The Bush administration has managed to play that role in conducting its relations with both Beijing and Taipei during the past few years. Accordingly, the triangular relationship among the United States, Taiwan, and China *can* be a “non-zero-sum” game.

In July 1970 Jerry Fowler, a specialist in Taiwanese affairs for the U.S. Embassy who left Taiwan after a five-year stay, predicted that “violently or peacefully, the Taiwanese seem certain to gain more control over their political destiny.”¹⁹ Fowler cautioned that “the United States must also learn to accept the Taiwanization of the Re-

public of China. After a Taiwanese takeover, the political situation will be more fluid, harder to predict and harder to manage.”²⁰ Fowler concluded that “the future of Taiwan belongs to the Taiwanese and the United States must learn to live with this fact.”²¹

According to Fowler’s prediction of Taiwan’s future in July 1970, the trend of Taiwan’s development is a dynamic one. The thinking of a new generation of Taiwanese today differs from that of the past generation. The international community needs to understand that under a zero-sum one-China policy, Taiwan’s separate identity and current political development is a natural evolution.

In 1971 the Nixon administration proposed the “dual representation” formula to solve the China membership problem in the United Nations; the United States did not think this new formula violated the one-China policy. In 1972 President Nixon visited the PRC; the United States did not think his official visit violated the one-China policy. In 1973 the United States and the PRC established liaison offices in Beijing and Washington, D.C.; the Nixon administration did not think it violated the one-China policy. Should the United States return to a more flexible interpretation and implementation of the one-China policy by taking the middle road and once again accept the reality of the existence of the ROC on Taiwan as it did from 1950 through 1978, it will become less necessary for Taiwan to take a more “proactive” direction.

The international community should encourage the PRC to face reality—the peaceful coexistence of the ROC and the PRC—and begin meaningful Cross Strait dialogue based on parity without preconditions.

During his second term, President Chen has committed himself to a Cross Strait peace and stability framework under “one principle, four issues.” The one principle is the principle of peace. The four major issues areas are the establishment of a negotiation mechanism, exchanges based on equality and reciprocity, the establishment of a political relationship, and the prevention of mili-

tary conflicts. Chen suggests that meanwhile Beijing not raise the one-China principle and that Taipei not raise a “one-country-on-each side” principle.²² It is best for the interests of both parties to negotiate on the principle of peace.

Former U.S. State Department official Leo Moser observed in 1971 that Taiwan is inherently the weaker party, but he noted that the United States wants Taiwan to negotiate, not capitulate. After all, as Moser so wisely stated at that time, “Taiwan is not ours to give away.”²³

In the twenty-first century, after the baptism of Taiwan’s democracy, Taiwan’s people can no longer acquiesce in any unilateral decisions made by Beijing about Taiwan’s future actions. The international community needs to understand that under a zero-sum one-China policy, Taiwan’s separate identity and current political development constitute a natural evolution.

Taiwan will not unilaterally decide its “next step,” but will regard Beijing’s actions when making its decision. High-level communication channels between Washington and Taipei should be developed to promote better understanding and bridge gaps of misperception. The biggest challenge for Taiwan’s newly reelected president in 2004 will be how Taipei takes advantage of opportunities to create nonzero sum relations and pave the road for an all-win and peaceful “next step.”

About the Author

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Notes

1. “President Chen’s Interview by *The Washington Post*,” *News Releases*, March 30, 2004, Office of the President, ROC; see <<http://www.president.gov.tw/>>.

2. *United Daily News*, October 20, 2003, A3.

3. “Annual Report on the Military Power of

the People's Republic of China," Report to Congress Pursuant to the FY2000 National Defense Authorization Act (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, July 28, 2003), 5.

4. Ibid., 43.

5. From Leo J. Moser to Ambassador Brown, "Policy Proposal on 'Future of Taiwan.'" November 24, 1971, Confidential (Secret Nodis Attachments); RG59, General Records of the Department of State, Subject Files of the Republic of China Affairs, 1951–1975, Box 11, National Archives, College Park, Maryland, 40–41.

6. See testimony of Assistant Secretary James Kelly, U.S. Congress, House, International Relations Committee, *The Taiwan Relations Act: The Next Twenty-Five Years*, Hearing, 108th Congress, April 21, 2004, Washington, D.C., <http://www.house.gov/international_relations/108/Kel042104.htm>.

7. ROC Mainland Affairs Council; see <<http://www.mac.gov.tw/>>.

8. ROC Mainland Affairs Council; see <<http://www.mac.gov.tw/>>.

9. Min Lee, "China Rules Out Hong Kong 2007 Election," *Associated Press*, April 26, 2004; see <<http://www.ap.org/>>.

10. Keith Bradsher, "Flotilla Is Beijing's Message to an Unsettled Hong Kong," *The New York Times*, May 6, 2004; see <<http://www.nytimes.com/>>.

11. "President Chen's Interview by *The Washington Post*," *News Releases*, March 30, 2004, Office of the President, ROC; see <<http://www.president.gov.tw/>>.

12. Philip P. Pan and David E. Hoffman, "Taiwan's President Maintains Hard Line," *The Washington Post*, March 30, 2004, A1.

13. See testimony of Assistant Secretary James Kelly, U.S. Congress, House, International Relations Committee, *The Taiwan Relations Act: The Next Twenty-Five Years*, Hearing, 108th Congress, April 21, 2004, Washington, D.C., <http://www.house.gov/international_relations/108/Kel042104.htm>.

14. Alan D. Romberg, "U.S. Policy After the Taiwan Election: Divining the Future," Address to the SAIS China Program, March 10, 2004, 5.

15. Stephen R. Graubard, *Kissinger: Portrait of a Mind* (New York, 1973), 17.

16. *The Washington Post*, April 15, 2004; see <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/>>.

17. "DPP Policy Brief on the New Constitution"; see <<http://www.dpp.org.tw/>>.

18. *The Washington Post*, March 30, 2004, A1.

19. From Amem (American Embassy), Taipei, to Department of State, "The Taiwanization of Taiwan, or Can the Republic of China Survive Until 1984?" Secret Airgram, July 21, 1970, 2, 3. From POL CHINA to POL 7 CHINAT, Subject Numeric Files, 1970–1973, Box 2202, RG59, General Records of the Department of State, National Archives, College Park, Maryland, 8.

20. Ibid., 12.

21. Ibid., 14.

22. "President Chen's Interview by *The Washington Post*," *News Releases*, March 30, 2004, Office of the President, ROC; see <<http://www.president.gov.tw/>>.

23. From Leo J. Moser to Ambassador Brown, "The Future of Taiwan," November 15, 1971, Secret Memorandum, 1. Box 8, Subject Files of the Office of Republic of China Affairs, 1951–1978, RG59, General Records of the Department of State, National Archives, College Park, Maryland, 5.

