Taiwan Has Had Enough of China’s Bullying

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In the first half of 2003, there was a noticeable shift in public opinion in Taiwan regarding whether our government should emphasize Cross-Strait relations or give top priority to foreign policy.

The latest surveys show a move away from the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as the major focus of our foreign policy and toward an emphasis on international relations. That was not the case as recently as a year ago, when a majority of our people felt that priority should be given to our contacts with the PRC rather than our place in the international community. For instance, in a survey for the Mainland Affairs Council conducted in May of this year by the Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, 37 percent of people in Taiwan said foreign relations were more important than Cross-Strait relations, whereas only 30 percent gave priority to the latter.

This is a distinct change from a poll taken by the same organization a year earlier. The 2002 poll showed 35 percent favoring an emphasis on the development of Cross-Strait relations; only 26 percent said that Taiwan should emphasize international relations.

The people of Taiwan seem to be gradually turning away from mainland China and turning toward the wider world. Beijing has brought this reaction on itself. Ironically, this is exactly the opposite of what the PRC wants—to convince our people somehow to accept integration into its totalitarian system. Leave it to tyrants to misunderstand consistently how a free people will react to their heavy-handed tactics.

The recent transformation of Taiwanese opinion is the result of three major events: the SARS outbreak in Taiwan, the World Health Organization’s (WHO’s) indifferent response to the epidemic, and China’s attempt to downgrade the status of Taiwan’s permanent mission to the World Trade Organization (WTO).

The Outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in Taiwan

As soon as the SARS epidemic appeared in Taiwan earlier this year, we reported this development to the WHO, in keeping with our international obligations. This can be contrasted with China, where SARS originated and where authorities covered up the disease for several critical months. In a May 21, 2003, editorial, The Wall Street Journal concluded:

If China had done what Taiwan did when the first cases of SARS came to its attention back in November—reported them immediately and asked for help—the world might have been able to contain the disease within China’s borders.

But Beijing, which was slow to alert the world to the existence of SARS, spared no effort to block Taiwan’s application for membership in the WHO. On May 19, for the seventh consecutive year, the WHO rejected our bid for observership solely due to pressure from the PRC—this despite the fact that U.S. Secretary of Health Tommy Thompson called for Taiwan’s inclusion and the U.S. Congress passed a bill urging that Taiwan be allowed to participate in the WHO. This bill was signed into law by President Bush.
Although the WHO’s stated goal is “the attainment by all peoples of the highest possible level of health,” it ignored an imminent threat to the health of the people of Taiwan for blatantly political reasons.

The people of Taiwan were appalled by the WHO’s indifference in the face of a contagion that afflicted 647 individuals and caused 84 deaths in Taiwan in just a few weeks—more than in any other country except China.

Indeed, on a per capita basis, Taiwan had the highest death toll from SARS in the world. Whereas 646 SARS deaths were recorded in China and Hong Kong (out of a population of 1.3 billion), 84 deaths were recorded in Taiwan (out of a population of 23 million).

Our lack of representation also prevented the WHO from rendering any assistance during the 1998 outbreak of Type 71 enterovirus in Taiwan (which affected 300,000 children and killed 80) or in the aftermath of the September 1999 earthquake, which resulted in nearly 2,000 deaths.

Our people were equally incensed by Beijing’s position that the WHO could assist Taiwan only with China’s approval. The SARS epidemic made the people of Taiwan realize the impact that foreign relations—specifically Taiwan’s exclusion from multinational organizations—has on their daily lives.

The WHO’s Indifferent Response to the SARS Epidemic in Taiwan

Unlike the prompt assistance that it rendered to the PRC as SARS was spreading in that country, the WHO dispatched no medical experts to Taiwan until early May—nearly seven weeks after the outbreak there was first reported. Obviously, timely intervention is crucial in halting the spread of communicable diseases. Who knows how many lives might have been saved if fear of offending Beijing hadn’t delayed the WHO’s response to our plight?

When confronted by what could have become a worldwide pandemic, the WHO did not hesitate to offer its expert assistance to other Asian nations such as Vietnam, Singapore, and the PRC. The organization mobilized to help the PRC, despite Beijing’s original refusal to accept WHO support after the outbreak of SARS had been internationally concealed in that country. Yet for almost two months, Taiwan’s earnest and timely requests for assistance were rebuffed. Help from Geneva was scarce and agonizingly late in coming.

Adding salt to Taiwan’s wounds, the head of Taiwan’s Department of Health was not even permitted to brief WHO members on the status of SARS in Taiwan during the WHO’s annual meeting in Geneva.

At the same time, at the UN headquarters in New York, the head of our Representative Office in that city was invited to address the UN Correspondents Press Club on SARS in Taiwan. Because of more pressure from the PRC, that briefing was canceled. If China has its way, Taiwan will always be invisible.

Could treatment by an international body charged with a vital humanitarian mission be more dangerously discriminatory than the WHO’s behavior toward Taiwan? The people of Taiwan feel like abandoned orphans. It was not simply the indifference of the WHO that angered and disappointed them but the malice of a group of obsessive bureaucrats on the mainland. The SARS epidemic made the Taiwanese people acutely aware of the need to pursue our own interests aggressively in the international arena, without regard to China’s delusions of sovereignty over our land and our free people.

China’s Attempt to Downgrade the Status of Taiwan’s Permanent Mission to the WTO

On the heels of its “victory” at the WHO, China sought to change Taiwan’s official designation at the WTO.
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After a decade of painstaking negotiations, Taiwan joined the WTO in January 2002. Like every other WTO member, Taiwan has a “permanent mission” to the WTO—in our case, the Permanent Mission of the Separate Customs Territory of Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen, and Matsu.

The issue seemed to have been settled. But in February of this year, again at the behest of China, the WTO Secretariat proposed that the title of Taiwan’s delegation be changed from “permanent mission” to “office,” bearing a status identical to that of Hong Kong and Macau, which are both part of the PRC.

The justification for the requested change advanced by the WTO Secretariat was a nonbinding 1992 statement by the council chairman of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), forerunner of the WTO. Thus the excuse for forcing this humiliation on Taiwan was a nonbinding statement made by the then chairman of an organization that no longer exists.

This issue aroused enormous public concern in our country. In turn, Taiwan’s permanent representative to the WTO was severely criticized by some in the media as being weak.

These three events have been the cause of anger and deep frustration felt by the people of Taiwan. We now feel it is absolutely essential to expand our foreign relations.

The fallout from the aforementioned matters is reflected in another issue—that of adding the English word Taiwan to the cover of the Republic of China’s (ROC’s) passport. In the past such a plan would have been considered controversial, as it might have been viewed by the authorities on the mainland as a move toward openly proclaiming our sovereignty. The PRC has indeed strongly criticized this change in recent weeks. Yet the reality is quite different for most people in Taiwan. In nine consecutive opinion polls conducted over the last 12 months, more than half our populace has expressed their support for this addition to the cover of the ROC passport.

Moreover, according to an opinion poll conducted on one of Taiwan’s major English-language radio stations in June, more than 80 percent of our people favor this addition. Prior to making a decision on this matter, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs consulted with all major political parties in Taiwan. None expressed the slightest reservation about this change. It was thus decided that in September we will begin issuing passports with TAIWAN on the cover. Given the often contentious nature of Taiwanese politics (and the fact that opposition parties hold a majority of seats in the Legislative Yuan), it is extraordinary that such a change could be made so smoothly. The consensus reached on this issue reflects a new-found determination by all sectors of our society and inspires the people of Taiwan to assert themselves more aggressively on the political stage.

A presidential election will be held in Taiwan early next year. Foreign affairs has become a field of intense public interest. Many politicians see international relations as a new political battlefield. Given public insistence that the government move forcefully to safeguard Taiwan’s national interests and dignity, political figures who fail to respond to this trend will put their careers at risk.

In its policy toward Taiwan, the PRC has gradually come to focus on winning support from the general public and in courting businesspeople while trying to sell its image of being flexible in regard to direct links between Taiwan and mainland China. This may appear to be an improvement on the situation of a few years ago when Beijing was openly threatening military action if Taiwan did not agree to unification with the mainland and was test-firing ballistic missiles in our direction. But the PRC continues to repress Taiwan on the diplomatic front. If anything, it has intensified its efforts to isolate us internationally. This came even at the cost of keeping Taiwan out of the WHO when such isolation threatened the health and well-being of our citizens.

Like its military intimidation and bellicose rhetoric, Beijing’s latest offensive is bound to backfire. Instead of being intimidated, the people of Taiwan are demanding increased emphasis on foreign contacts and securing our participation in international organizations. Instead of drawing us closer, China is compelling us to move in
an altogether different direction—toward the wider world. The public opinion polls cited earlier, the furor in Taiwan over our treatment by the WHO (and threats against us at the WTO), and the absence of controversy over the modification of the ROC passport all reflect this reorientation.

Since assuming the post of minister of foreign affairs, I have proposed basing our foreign policy on three fundamental pillars—democracy and human rights, shared economic prosperity, and peace and security. These principles are not only universal values but also necessary for Taiwan’s national development.

I am delighted that after months of preparation and hard work, the Democracy Foundation of Taiwan (modeled on the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy) is already functioning. This is only the fourth government-sponsored organization of its kind in the world (the others being those in the United States, Britain, and Germany) and the first in Asia.

We expect the Democracy Foundation of Taiwan to work closely with its counterparts to promote democracy and freedom—the fundamental values that we all hold dear.

Unlike the accomplishments of the other three nations that have established democracy foundations, Taiwan’s achievements in self-govern ment and human rights are relatively recent. This puts us in a unique position to aid developing nations in shaping their own democratic institutions and in acquiring the art of government of the people, by the people, and for the people—in Abraham Lincoln’s historic words.

Like Americans, the people of Taiwan will allow no one to threaten the way of life they have freely chosen. The people of Taiwan and of the United States are confident that the ideals of democracy and freedom will ultimately prevail worldwide. I believe that based on our shared interests, solid friendship, and mutual trust, Taiwan and the United States will work together for the fundamental dignity and rights of all humanity.

About the Author

Dr. Eugene Chien is the foreign minister of the ROC (Taiwan).