



WHY TAIWAN MATTERS

By June Teufel Dreyer

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The current state of U.S.-Taiwan relations leaves much to be desired. A recent analysis describes the island's narrowing options, tracing a trajectory toward absorption by China. Given a continuation of current trends, it is difficult to disagree with this conclusion. It is my belief that U.S. actions bear a large measure of responsibility for this drift, and that for two major reasons—first, to ensure its national security and maintain regional peace; and second, to remain true to its own founding beliefs, the United States must make efforts to reverse this drift.

With regard to the first of these factors, the Chinese military has been a focus of my research efforts for the past several decades. In this capacity, I regularly read military journals from the People's Republic of China (PRC) dealing with defense matters. The militant tone of the articles contained therein is striking, as is the way Chinese strategists view Taiwan—not as an end in itself, a *terra irredenta* that must be possessed, but as a stepping stone for reaching China's larger goals of controlling the regional sea lanes and beyond. Chinese analysts concentrate on the importance of Taiwan to the PRC's strategic future. The inability of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to break out of the first island chain into the Pacific without first taking Taiwan is standard commentary in Chinese journals. This chain is visualized as an arc running south from the Japanese archipelago to the Philippines, with some strategists projecting its trajectory all the way past the Indonesian archipelago to the British-administered Indian Ocean base at Diego Garcia that is frequently used by U.S. military planes.

Another supposition that is noticeable in the journals is that the PLA navy can attain decisive command of the seas by projecting power eastward from Taiwan. One commentator states that Taiwan is currently a shackle but that, if possessed by the PRC, would be the key to the open ocean. Since the island occupies the mid-section of the first island chain, PRC strategists reason, its capture would cut the chain in two. Chinese fleet and naval aviation units could use Taiwan as a major base. Sea and air combat radii from bases on the island would reach the flanks of Japan and the Philippines. Another analyst visualizes China and Taiwan as forming a T-shaped battlefield position able to defend the PRC against semi-encirclement while at the same time facilitating the Chinese military's breakout from the second island chain that stretches from the Japanese archipelago south to the Marshall and Bonin islands, including the U.S. base at Guam.¹

Taiwan faces a strategic dilemma: it is principally dependent on China for its economic prosperity while it must principally rely on the United States for its security. The latter is confirmed by the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) of 1979 and by the six assurances given to Taiwan by President Ronald Reagan in 1982.² Meanwhile, a series of “accidents” committed to print and “misstatements” by high-ranking US officials—sometimes corrected and sometimes not—have caused Taiwanese to worry about whether Washington intends to keep its promises.

In 2003, for example, the Department of Defense published a book entitled “Taiwan, Province of China.” I am told, but have

¹These journals are not in current circulation though are available, untranslated, through the extremely expensive subscription service CNIK (China National Infrastructure Knowledge) online data base. An excellent summary of the articles cited above appears in Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes, *Red Star Over the Pacific: China's Rise and the Challenge to U.S. Maritime Strategy* (Annapolis, Maryland, 2011:Naval Institute Press.

² The six assurances are 1. The United States will not set a date for termination of arms sales to Taiwan. 2. The United States will not alter the terms of the [Taiwan Relations Act](#) 3. The United States will not consult with China in advance before making decisions about U.S. arms sales to Taiwan. 4. The United States will not mediate between Taiwan and China. 5. the United States will not alter its position about the sovereignty of Taiwan which is that the question is one to be decided peacefully by the Chinese themselves, and will not pressure Taiwan to enter into negotiations with China. 6. The United States will not formally recognize Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan.

not seen, that a more recent edition does not mention this. In any case, one must wonder how this happened in the first place. A year later, Secretary of State Colin Powell stated that “There is only one China. Taiwan is not independent. It does not enjoy sovereignty as a nation, and that remains our policy, our firm policy.” This was clearly a violation of the six assurances. After a firestorm of criticism, administration spokespersons explained that a jet-lagged Powell had misspoken, that there had been no change in policy, and that the six assurances remained in force. Powell himself appeared to back away from the comments, but never actually retracted them, saying only that “the term of art is to have a peaceful resolution of the problem.”³

Most recently, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates spoke of taking Chinese sensitivities into account when deciding what weapons to sell Taiwan.⁴ Apart from the patent absurdity of allowing one’s partner’s only enemy the privilege of deciding what weapons one will sell to one’s partner, Gates’s statement is a clear violation of the Taiwan Relations Act’s explicit instructions that the determinants of Taiwan’s need for weapons is the sole purview of congress and the administration,⁵ as well as of the third of the six assurances. Decisions on weapons sales to Taiwan drag on and, when finally decided, may be of obsolescent versions of the items desired rather than state-of-the art equipment. In tandem with the large increments in the PLA’s budget over the past three decades and the stunning improvements in its weaponry that have accompanied them, American actions have eroded the defensive balance of power across the Strait that the TRA obligates the US to maintain. The delay in making a decision on the sale of F- 16 C/Ds is a case in point. Although capable fighters, the F-16 C/Ds would quickly be overwhelmed by the PLA Air Force’s indigenously-produced and comparably equipped J-10B and J-11 B fighter variants.⁶ Yet the U.S. has still not agreed to the sale. Concerns about the PRC’s objections not only contradict the law but are ill-founded: China has made clear again and again that it objects to *all* U.S. arms sales to Taiwan.

To add to Taiwan’s anxiety over official waffling and misstatements, a U.S. journal typically described as influential has run articles advocating that the United States, by various means, abandon the island.⁷ The journal has published no articles articulating a different point of view, leaving Taiwanese to wonder if its parent organization, widely regarded as reflecting official thinking, is heralding a change of government policy or whether that organization is simply biased in favor of the PRC. If Taiwan is to be abandoned, they reason, perhaps it would be preferable to seek accommodation with the PRC rather than resist its blandishments and risk being coerced into compliance through military force.

This brings us to the second factor that should determine U.S. policy toward Taiwan: the need to remain true to our own principles. To abandon a democratic country to an authoritarian government with an abysmal human rights record is a repudiation of all that the United States stands for. Moreover, this country was founded on the principle of the right to self-determination, as stated in our declaration of independence. The right to self-determination was part of President Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points, and was most recently articulated by President Barack Obama on his visit to the Middle East.⁸ The same principle is integral to the philosophy of Dr. Sun Yat-sen, who is acknowledged by both sides of the Taiwan Strait as the father of the Chinese republic. The right to referendum is explicitly mentioned in the constitution of the Republic of China. Yet, after the PRC in the 2004-2008 period expressed strong opposition to Taiwan holding a referendum on any topic, even on issues unrelated to the island’s political status, the U.S. administration did so as well. It was thus violating its own commitment to self-determination by denying it to other people in order to appease Beijing. Even as the Kuomintang (KMT) government was defying its own constitution to please Beijing.⁹

During People’s Liberation Army Chief of Staff Chen Bingde’s recent visit to Washington, he was believed to have raised the issue of modifying or eliminating entirely the Taiwan Relations Act. Almost certainly he was told no. I wonder, however, if the general’s concern was unnecessary: both the TRA and the six assurances have been ignored by the past several

³ CNBC, October 27, 2004.

⁴ “We have tried to thread the needle pretty carefully in terms of Taiwan’s defensive capabilities, but at the same time being aware of China’s sensitivities.” <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4830>

⁵ “The President and the Congress shall determine the nature and quantity of such defense articles and services based *solely* upon their judgment of the needs of Taiwan.” Taiwan Relations Act, Section 3 (b). Italics added

⁶ According to PLA Air Force expert Richard D. Fisher, the US has the option to equip the new F-16s to a “4th generation plus” level of capability, the most notable feature being an active electronically scanned array (AESA) radar. The J-10B has AESA radar and is expected to enter production this year. The J-11B is now being produced in three variants with a Chinese-built turbofan—a major significant accomplishment for the PRC’s aerospace sector. They could produce 70 of both these fighters in about 3 years. Had we sold Taiwan the new F-16s in 2006 when the request was first made; they would be arriving at about the same time as the PLA’s new fighters, and thus would have maintained a technical parity that would have aided deterrence. The Chinese air force already has numerous Su-27s and Su-30s which are superior to the F-16 fighters.

⁷ Bruce, Gilley, “Not So Dire Straits: How the Finlandization of Taiwan Benefits U.S. Security,” *Foreign Policy*, January/February 2010, pp. 44-60; Charles Glaser “Will China’s rise Lead to War? Why Realism Does Not Mean Pessimism,” *Foreign Policy*, March/April 2011, pp. 80-91.

⁸ William Dobson, “The Two Words Obama Didn’t Mention,” Washington Post, May 19, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/post/the-two-words-obama-didnt-mention/2011/05/19/AFeSfM7G_blog.htm

⁹ Bowing to pressure for a referendum just before an election, the KMT-controlled Legislative Yuan passed a referendum law with so many restrictions as to make the possibility of any initiative passing close to impossible.

administrations, which simply repeat the mantra about peaceful resolution while their actions nudge Taiwan into an ever closer relationship with China.

These admonitions to peaceful resolution of differences come athwart the Beijing government's absolute refusal to consider meaningful talks except on grounds that give the PRC what it wants. Hence Washington's advice to peacefully resolve differences sends a clear signal to the Taiwan people that they must settle their differences on Beijing's terms. In its zeal to improve relations with China, the administration of President Ma Ying-jeou has sought to avoid taking actions that will antagonize Beijing. Many, if not most of these, have come at the cost of erosions in Taiwan's sovereignty. A number of them are subtle, such as the opening of air routes between the two countries. Direct flights between the two are undoubtedly a convenience to travelers and to commerce. But the Chinese side turned down the Taiwan side's request for flights on lucrative routes like Taipei to Shanghai while agreeing to less traveled destinations like Taipei to Nanchang and Hefei as well as northward routes that pass through PRC air space control zones only, thus emphasizing the domestic character of the routes. And where was the United States when the World Health Organization, acceding to the PRC's request, instructed its members to refer to "Taiwan, province of China"?

There have also been negative repercussions for Taiwan's rule of law. A semi-serious joke circulating in Taiwan states that the country has a bipartisan policy: the KMT and the Chinese Communist Party. As soon as the Ma administration took office, it began to prosecute a large number of office-holders under the previous administration for alleged financial misdeeds. The procedures used were often irregular, leading to a number of protest letters from foreign human rights groups, academics, and public figures. Among the distinguished signatories was the professor at Harvard Law School who had served as Ma's mentor when he was a student there. People have also been arrested for peacefully picketing for the right to a referendum, despite its legality under the constitution. One consequence of the Ma administration's encouragement of Chinese media to buy into Taiwan media has been a diminution in freedom of the press. The independent Paris-based organization Reporters Without Borders downgraded Taiwan from 36th place in 2008, when Ma assumed office, to 59th in 2009, specifically mentioning that "the new ruling party in Taiwan has tried to interfere in state and privately-owned media."¹⁰ Most recently, the organization queried the Taiwan government as to why its television satellite operator, Chunghua Telecom, has refused to continue relaying the signal of New Tang Dynasty Asia Pacific, which broadcasts program critical of China.¹¹

Taiwanese concerns are reinforced when administration spokespersons regularly express uncritical praise for the progress that has been made in cross-Strait relations without mentioning the erosion of democracy and freedom on the island.

Ladies and gentlemen, the author of the study mentioned in the opening paragraph of this testimony appears to accept the drift toward Taiwan's absorption as inevitable, and advises that, given Japan's role as the linchpin of the U.S. security presence in the Asia-Pacific, Washington will have to work harder to reassure wary Japanese, as well as other U.S. allies and associates, of the U.S. resolve and ability to hedge against a rising China.¹² I would argue that, if the United States is to keep nudging Taiwan toward absorption with China, there can be no credible reassurances, and that now is the time to halt a drift that is dangerous not only to the security of the Taiwanese but to the United States' interests in the region and to the credibility of the global alliance system.

As a start toward reversing this drift, I would suggest

- the immediate sale of the F-16 C/Ds
- initiation of a complete review of the cross-Strait military balance to assess Taiwan's legitimate defense needs, exclusive of the PRC's desires.
- removal of the restrictions on contacts between high-ranking American and Taiwanese officials and in the places they can be held
- a strong affirmation of the right of the people of Taiwan to determine their own political future, free from pressure by external forces

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¹⁰ <http://en.rsfs.org/press-freedom-index-2009,1001.html>. It rose to 48th a year later, apparently because of a deterioration in other countries' media rather than an improvement in Taiwan's.

¹¹ http://en.rsfs.org/spip.php?page=imprimir_articulo&id_article=40343

¹² Robert Sutter, "Taiwan's Future: Narrowing Straits," *NBR Analysis*, National Bureau of Asian Research, Seattle Washington, May 2011, p. 22.