



Taiwan "Independence"

by Ralph A. Cossa

President George W. Bush, in an attempt to defuse tensions with Beijing after his assertion in late April that America would do "whatever it takes" to help Taiwan defend itself, quickly reaffirmed the "one-China" policy. In comments directed toward Taipei, he pointedly asserted: "I certainly hope Taiwan adheres to the one-China policy. And a declaration of independence is not the one-China policy." This caveat is critically important to Beijing, which remains suspicious that "independence" is Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian's (and perhaps America's) true objective.

Beijing's fears seem unwarranted, at least in the near term. In my own recent meetings with Taiwan officials and scholars, I met no one who thought a declaration of independence was a viable option for Taiwan. In fact, President Chen has specifically stated there would be no declaration of independence as long as the PRC did not attempt forcibly to reunite Taiwan with the Mainland. While a referendum on this issue was on the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) agenda when it was in the opposition, President Chen unilaterally dropped this idea in one of many (thus far unrecognized and unanswered) peaceful gestures toward Beijing.

In reality, were a referendum to be held on the issue today, it is expected that fewer than 10-15% of the Taiwan population would vote for an immediate declaration of independence. However, this is probably double or triple the number who would vote for reunification with the mainland (now or at anytime in the foreseeable future). The overwhelming majority would prefer to maintain the status quo, primarily because they are concerned that an open declaration of independence would create chaos if not outright war across the Taiwan Strait; a confrontation that no one, including Washington, wants.

The dilemma for Beijing is that, as each year passes, fewer and fewer Taiwanese support reunification with China, as the old generation of displaced mainlanders fades from the scene and are replaced with a population that sees itself first and foremost as Taiwanese. They are Chinese-Taiwanese in the same sense that I am an Italian-American. They may take pride in their ethnic roots but they take even greater pride in their Taiwanese identity and in their economic as well as political accomplishments.

Their primary motivation for not seeking formal independence is their very real fear of the consequences. Beijing understands this, which is why it refuses to relinquish the use of force option and continues periodically to rattle sabers in Taiwan's direction. But, the more Beijing sticks to its belligerent stance, the less incentive there is for Taiwanese to seek a closer association with the Mainland. As one Taiwanese put it, "if China was really sincere in wanting to embrace Taiwan toward the

'motherland,' it would not be threatening it's long lost son with military action if he does not come home now." Taiwanese argue that Beijing should treat reunification like "a future marriage in the works;" one that requires a "proper engagement period" to establish a new relationship based on mutual trust. For the two sides to reunite, China must first also embrace democracy, which implies a very long engagement period.

In the meantime, both sides need to show a bit more flexibility in seeking common ground. President Chen has hinted at accepting some type of "one China, differing definitions" formula and PRC Vice Premier Qian Qichen has talked about "Taiwan and the mainland being part of one China," although Qian's one China is still centered in Beijing. What is needed is a type of "one nation, two states" or "commonwealth" formula under which Taiwan and the PRC are both seen as part of a greater China. Such an arrangement does not seem likely under the current leadership in Beijing but is not impossible over time.

Until then, the people of Taiwan should take some comfort in the realization that Taiwan is already a fully independent state and is likely to safely and securely remain so... as long as it doesn't declare itself to be one.

Ralph A. Cossa is President of the Pacific Forum CSIS