



Washington's Hands-On Approach to Managing Cross-Strait Tension by Bonnie S. Glaser

On the surface, it appears that China, Taiwan, and the United States share the same objective of preserving the status quo in the Taiwan Strait. The problem is that all three have different definitions of the status quo. Beijing insists that Taiwan is part of China. The legitimacy of its regime is intertwined with preventing Taiwan from gaining juridical stature as a sovereign country. Taipei views itself as an independent, sovereign nation and is seeking to make that status irreversible, unless the people on the island vote otherwise in a referendum. The U.S. has a "one China" policy and insists that differences between the two sides of the Strait be worked out peacefully, lest the U.S. be compelled to become involved militarily under obligations stipulated in the Taiwan Relations Act.

The status quo is thus in dispute and is unstable. The danger of military conflict is present and may be increasing. Since being re-elected for a second term, President Chen Shui-bian has reaffirmed his pledge to hold a referendum in 2006 on a new constitution that would be enacted in May 2008. Washington is not likely to object to a new Taiwan constitution that promotes more effective governance, as long as it is formulated and adopted through legal mechanisms and does not seek to unilaterally resolve the dispute over sovereignty. China strongly opposes a new constitution for Taiwan because it could break the continuity of the Republic of China and represent the founding of a new Taiwanese state. Beijing's redlines are not unalterable, however. China might not overreact to the enactment of a new constitution, even one that is approved by a referendum, if the preamble and articles I-VI of the current document which address the ROC's name, geographic boundaries, and its relationship to China are left largely intact.

Frustration on the mainland is rising with a policy toward Taiwan that many Chinese view as too soft. China has shown considerable restraint in the past year in the face of what it judged as repeated provocations, including the passage of a referendum law by Taiwan's legislature and the holding of the first referendum simultaneous with the recent presidential election. Beijing's relatively relaxed approach was premised on an expectation that Chen would be replaced by the pan-Blue forces. Chen's re-election has alarmed Beijing and stoked a fierce debate over what mix of policies will prevent Taiwan from permanently severing its ties with the mainland.

Voices in China favoring the use of military force to compel Taipei to halt its movement toward juridical independence are growing louder. They say doing so is imperative to disprove Taiwan's claim that China is a paper tiger that doesn't dare to use force because it would risk an all-out war with the U.S. Some Chinese even believe that there is

sufficient concern in Washington about Chen's actions and his future agenda that the U.S. may acquiesce in a limited use of force by the PLA – for example, to seize an offshore island, temporarily impose a limited blockade, or fire a lone missile at a military target on Taiwan.

Those in China who question the advisability of relying on military means to warn Taipei of the dangers of going too far may be losing ground in this debate. Proponents of using economic levers to attract Taiwan toward political integration with the mainland have lost credibility as cross-Strait trade has flourished while failing to bridge the political divide. Even though over half a million Taiwan businessmen have established residences on the mainland, this has not stemmed the growth of a separate Taiwan consciousness. Now that over half of Taiwan's electorate cast votes for Chen who ran on an anti-China platform, there is growing doubt about pinning hopes on the Taiwan people and Taiwan's business community to preserve a political link with the Chinese motherland. Beijing now worries that in the wake of its astonishing loss, the pan-Blue opposition will splinter and lose its majority in the legislative elections slated for December.

As China's confidence wanes in Taiwan's internal checks that might curb momentum toward de jure independence, Beijing is increasingly looking to the U.S. to rein in President Chen. The Chinese hope that Washington will pressure Taipei to back down from its plan to create a new constitution. They also seek to establish a broader understanding with the Bush administration on what steps by Taipei would constitute a provocation and how the U.S. and China would respond separately or jointly if those agreed-upon red lines were crossed.

Is Washington likely to cooperate with Beijing to avert a crisis in the Taiwan Strait? Surely this will not be the Bush administration's preferred option. Siding with a communist country against a democracy would draw fire from Republicans and Democrats alike. President Bush is no doubt peeved at Chen for disregarding his calls to back down from holding a referendum, but he would probably find distasteful the notion of collaborating with the nation that he once termed America's strategic competitor against the 22 million people on Taiwan whom he promised early in his presidency that he would do "whatever it took" to help defend themselves against a mainland attack.

Instead, the U.S. is working primarily on its own to compel Taiwan to refrain from actions that will further incite cross-Strait tensions. The message to Taiwan to cool it has become clearer and louder in recent weeks. In testimony to Congress on April 21, Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly noted that it would be irresponsible for Taiwan to treat Chinese statements on the possible use of force as empty threats. He also noted that there are limits on what the U.S.

will support as Taiwan considers changing its constitution. Kelly called on President Chen to be responsible, democratic, and restrained. He also reminded Taiwan that U.S. support is not a blank check to resist dialogue with the mainland. Washington expects Chen to enunciate a clear vision of Taiwan's future relationship with the mainland in his May 20 inaugural address and offer a roadmap for realizing that goal.

While admonishing Taipei, the U.S. is taking steps to reassure Beijing that it will oppose efforts by Taipei to unilaterally sever Taiwan from the mainland and will not recognize Taiwan as an independent country. At the same time, U.S. officials are publicly and privately stating that the use of force under any circumstances will not be countenanced. In addition, they continue to prod China to take steps to reduce its military threat to Taiwan. Calls for implementing military confidence building measures to reduce the likelihood of miscalculation or misunderstanding leading to conflict – not heard from U.S. officials since the late 1990s – are again in vogue.

The new hands-on approach to managing cross-Strait relations is a significant shift from the laissez-faire attitude that marked the first 2½ years of Bush administration policy toward cross-Strait relations. The shift is both welcome and necessary. The U.S. must be more actively engaged in preventive diplomacy in the Taiwan Strait. The stakes are high. Washington simply cannot afford a clash in the Taiwan Strait.

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