



## **Taiwan and WHO: Time to Move On** by Alan D. Romberg

The SARS crisis has put the spotlight on Taiwan's effort to gain observer status at this week's meeting of the World Health Assembly (WHA), the administrative body of the World Health Organization (WHO). SARS has not changed the fact that this question is technically complicated and strewn with political landmines. But it underscores that it is time to grant Taiwan's application.

Under WHA rules, non-state applicants may be granted observer status, although only "states" are eligible for full membership. Taipei has pressed its case for several years. However, the People's Republic of China is determined to obstruct all Taiwan efforts to expand its "international space" until Taipei affirms the "one China" principle, and Beijing will oppose the initiative again this year. Beijing should rethink its position.

The mainland's policy against Taiwan's participation in international organizations was forged in the late 1990s in response to Taiwan's assertiveness regarding its "separateness" from the PRC. With rare exception - as in the case of the World Trade Organization (WTO), where the international community demurred - Beijing has blocked Taipei, especially in UN-related organizations like WHO. But even where there is no UN connection or any connotation of statehood, the PRC has stood in Taiwan's path.

If Taiwan accepted the "one China" principle - even without accepting mainland sovereignty - the PRC is doubtless prepared to acquiesce in far greater international activities by the island. As long as "statehood" was not involved, Beijing would probably even sponsor such participation (though, in fact, this would be resented in Taiwan as demeaning).

Agreeing to Taiwan's WHO observer status while making clear it was in no way a first step toward "membership" would represent a sensible shift for Beijing from a blatantly political approach to a humanitarian one. This would not be easy, since China avoids doing anything beneficial to Taiwan's current president, Chen Shui-bian, whom it deeply mistrusts. But it would gain respect for China as a reasonable adjustment to meet the needs of the people in Taiwan rather than as a favor for Chen.

For Taipei to facilitate such a shift, it must end its own political gamesmanship over this question, where many have not hidden their ambition to move on from observer status to full membership as a "sovereign, independent state." The United States and others decided decades ago that, while the final relationship between Taiwan and the mainland is up to the two of them to decide - peacefully, in the meantime they would not treat Taiwan as a sovereign state. One should not expect Taipei to give up its claim of statehood, but if it is serious about the importance of such participation to the

livelihood of its people, it should cease its efforts in the WHO to press the political case.

The U.S. has long supported Taiwan's observership in WHO under a policy that calls for Taiwan's voice to be heard in international organizations, through membership where sovereignty is not involved, in some other appropriate way where it is. Lacking the power to impose this position on organizations, Washington has sought to make its views known without gratuitously confronting Beijing.

But while there is little point in a sharp confrontation with China over this issue, there is good reason to argue to Beijing that it is time for a change. Since we have made clear we will not support Taiwan independence in any of its many variants (e.g., "two Chinas," "one China, one Taiwan"), according Taiwan observer status in the WHO would be a constructive step to reduce cross-Strait tensions without challenging the PRC's "one China" principle.

For the WHO, itself, allowing two experts to go to Taipei recently was a good step, but it was a rare exception to its normal shunning of Taiwan. Even now, WHO should stop its shameless practices of refusing to deal regularly with the island because it is not part of the organization, listing "Taiwan Province" under "China," and excluding Taiwan health officials from WHO global videoconferences on SARS. All of that, of course, is at Beijing's behest, and WHO has important business to do with China. But if WHO is to serve world health interests rather than being a political pawn, it should be smart - and flexible - enough to find ways to cease these counter-productive practices to deal effectively with one of the areas most seriously impacted by SARS.

Treating Taiwan appropriately in this crisis should have been possible, but in reality it has proven extremely difficult. Thus the SARS issue has underscored the unreasonableness of the PRC's rigid position on Taiwan's international role, the counter-productiveness of Taipei's penchant for pushing the political envelope when real interests of its people are at stake, and the utility of the U.S. and others urging each side to serve their people, which both claim is their first priority.

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