



The following two PacNets provide opposing views on Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian's referendum initiative.

PacNet 10

Support Democracy, not Referendums, in Taiwan by Alan D. Romberg

Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian is in a tight race for reelection on March 20. In part to energize his supporters, he has proposed two referenda that day in order, he says, to deepen Taiwan's democracy and protect its "national sovereignty." Beijing, meanwhile, sees the referenda as the first step in a calculated, three-year timetable for establishing Taiwan's juridical independence, which, China states, would trigger the use of force. Given U.S. involvement in Taiwan's security, this raises the prospect of a Sino-American war – potentially even nuclear war.

Chen claims his goal, like George W. Bush's goal, is to preserve the "status quo" and that the president supports him. At the very least, this is misleading.

For over 30 years, as it has worked to advance relations with Beijing for reasons of fundamental national interest while protecting Taiwan against forced reunification, the United States has assiduously stayed out of the controversy over Taiwan's sovereignty, focusing on maintenance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. To do this, every president since Richard Nixon has "acknowledged" the PRC claim that Taiwan is part of "one China" and, while not embracing that assertion, has agreed not to support outcomes that conflict with it, such as "one China, one Taiwan" or "two Chinas." Though less than optimal for the U.S., PRC, or Taiwan, that stance has allowed all three to advance their interests without having to confront the contradictions – and risks of armed conflict – inherent in the competing claims. And within this framework, Taiwan has developed from a poor, authoritarian society into a prosperous democracy.

Now, while Chen may avoid "declaring" independence, he seeks to "consolidate" what he calls Taiwan's existing "sovereign, independent" status. This contrasts sharply with the U.S. view that preserving the "status quo" means not only ensuring that Beijing does not use force to achieve reunification but also that Taipei does not provoke war through unilateral challenges regarding Taiwan's sovereign status.

Polls have consistently reflected the pragmatism of Taiwan's people in supporting the "status quo" rather than directly challenging Beijing over "independence" in ways that could threaten the very basis of Taiwan's free and flourishing existence. However, Chen is currently appealing to the gut political aspirations of most people on the island, urging them to vote with their hearts, not their heads, assuming somehow – presumably including through the threat of American military

intervention – the worst will not happen. This is an unacceptable gamble with their future and ours.

After a rocky start, the Bush administration has, overall, steered an admirably balanced course through the dangerous political shoals of the Taiwan Strait. The U.S. has strongly backed democracy in Taiwan, including referenda on strictly local matters. But the current proposals by their very nature – regardless of their wording – ultimately implicate questions of war and peace, and while Washington is concerned about the PRC missile build-up opposite Taiwan, it has sought to discourage the referenda not only as ineffectual for dealing with those missiles but as unnecessarily provocative.

President Bush tried quiet diplomacy, but Chen Shui-bian ignored even his personal appeals. Consequently, in a highly unusual move, the president publicly criticized the Taiwan leader in mid-December. However, rather than taking stock of how seriously he was mismanaging relations with Taipei's main supporter, Chen sought, instead, to quell U.S. criticism with textual changes in the referenda, using them to ostensibly promote measures – increased defense spending and cross-Strait dialogue – favored in Washington.

But the U.S. saw the proposed votes as unnecessary for taking decisions on those issues and, after again unsuccessfully trying a low-key approach, eventually began to question publicly what constructive purpose these referenda served. Still Chen claimed – and claims – the U.S. appreciates his efforts and supports the referenda.

It is important to respect Taiwan's democracy and the people's right to vote on any issue. And Washington should maintain scrupulous neutrality in Taiwan's presidential election. But in light of the risks the current trend creates for U.S. national security interests, it is time to be more direct, to make U.S. views clear, minimizing any chance of miscalculation or later recriminations about the consequences of current steps for future U.S.-Taiwan relations and cross-Strait stability.

Although the U.S. still hopes to avoid commenting on the substance of cross-Strait sovereignty issues, Chen's continuing efforts may eventually force Washington to openly reject his definition of the "status quo." For now, at a minimum, the U.S. should state unambiguously that these referenda are unhelpful and potentially dangerous. We owe our friends in Taiwan – and ourselves – no less candor than that.

Alan D. Romberg is senior associate at the Henry L. Stimson Center, a non-partisan think tank in Washington, DC. He is author of "Rein In at the Brink of the Precipice: American Policy Toward Taiwan and U.S.-PRC Relations." He can be reached at aromberg@earthlink.net

Referendum Will Be a Landmark by Joseph Wu

Taiwan will hold a national referendum on March 20 on two topics: one on the need to counter the Chinese missile threat and another on the building of a framework for peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. Even though there has been plenty of pan-blue criticism and skepticism surrounding the referendum, the vote on the issues will be a historical landmark in Taiwan's political development.

Ever since the beginning of Taiwan's democratization in the late 1980s, the term "referendum" was most often equated with an "independence referendum" or to formally separate Taiwan and China. But after the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) adopted the "resolution regarding Taiwan's future" in 1999, which formally recognizes the status quo across the Taiwan Strait, the need for an independence referendum no longer exists.

After the DPP freed itself from the "Taiwan independence platform" through formally recognizing the status quo, a referendum became a useful mechanism to resolve some long-standing issues. That was the reason why the earlier proposals to hold a referendum on the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant, legislative reform, and World Health Organization participation received extremely high support among Taiwanese.

Using referendums to reform the Legislative Yuan in particular has received nearly unanimous support from the public. This is not surprising, because the public perception of the legislature is far from ideal. Surveys indicate that the Legislative Yuan is competing fiercely with the media for the No. 1 position as the source of Taiwan's problems. Of course Taiwan needs referendums as a democratic instrument for decision-making.

As the two proposed topics for referendum evidence themselves, the Taiwanese can exercise direct democracy without touching upon the sensitive sovereignty issues that are likely to ignite cross-Strait conflict. Referendums cannot only be a useful instrument to resolve internal debates, they can also pave the way for cross-Strait dialogue and negotiations.

The passage of the Referendum Law last November was significant. It was another victory for Taiwanese democracy following the development of freedom of speech, the establishment of an opposition party, the removal of martial law and the emergency decree, forceful retirement of lawmakers elected in China, and direct election of the president.

Records show that the attitude and approach of those who tried to deter Taiwan from moving ahead were similar to those of today.

Actually, the antidemocracy politicians remain similar. People First Party James Soong, the pan-blue vice presidential candidate, used to serve as the Government Information Office director under martial law and he strongly defended the Chinese Nationalist Party's (KMT) brutal suppression of the opposition. Back in 1994, now-Taipei Mayor Ma Ying-jeou fought against the popular election of the president and he is

now leading the crusade to crush the first ever referendum in Taiwan.

The pan-blue critics and skeptics continue to charge that holding the March 20 referendum is illegal and unnecessary, and will cause a cross-Strait crisis. It is even quietly telling the international community that this referendum is the crony of Taiwan independence and the DPP is paving the way for an independence referendum. They are of course lying just to stop Taiwan from moving forward. But eventually, the Taiwanese people's passionate pursuit of democracy will prevail.

Are the two topics of the referendum either divisive or difficult as some critics portray? Legislative Yuan records show that some pan-blue politicians enjoy slashing the budget for military procurement of any kind. It leads to repeated questions from the U.S. government whether Taiwan is determined to defend itself.

Su Chi, former Mainland Affairs Council chairman and chief foreign/cross-Strait policy adviser to KMT Chairman Lien Chan, is leading the argument that "Taiwan doesn't face a threat" (as argued in the *Washington Post*, Jan. 17). This is an extremely peculiar and unquestionably dangerous argument when China is pointing some 500 missiles at Taiwan. But this argument has been the basis for the pan-blue's boycott of the defense budget. Of course Taiwan needs a referendum topic like the one President Chen Shui-bian proposed to settle the issue.

Meanwhile, the topic of "framework for peace and stability" may or may not be divisive, but it is definitely difficult because of a serious lack of progress on cross-Strait dialog in the past few years. Chen is daring China to respond to his initiative on the framework, with details provided in his press conference.

If the people in Taiwan agree with what the president proposed as the "framework for peace and stability," the referendum will have a binding effect on the government no matter who wins the presidential race. The peace referendum is of course necessary, and it will certainly be an important page in the history of cross-Strait relations.

The DPP has been fighting for Taiwan's democracy even before that democracy came into being. The DPP has always been the key impetus to democratization, with the KMT authoritarianism and its remnant as the key obstacle. But the DPP has overcome every obstacle so far, and will again overcome the obstacle lying ahead of Taiwan's first exercise in direct democracy.

Joseph Wu is deputy secretary-general to the president. The article originally appeared in Taipei Times on Feb 04. He can be reached at dswu@mail.oop.gov.tw