



All Still Quiet Across the Taiwan Strait, but for How Long? by Yu Bin

When Condoleezza Rice visited Beijing July 8-9 for a “strategic dialogue” with her Chinese hosts, the national security advisor could not miss a growing sense of urgency, frustration, and determination in Beijing regarding Taiwan.

Divergent Perceptions

The timing of Beijing’s impatience couldn’t be more awkward for the Bush administration, which does not want another foreign policy problem in an election year saturated with post-Iraq fatigue. The heightened tension across the Taiwan Strait also defies the articulated rationale of the Bush foreign policy team: steadily growing U.S. weapons sales to and military-military integration with, Taiwan is supposed to balance and stabilize the situation across the Strait.

For Beijing, U.S. weapons sales and upgraded military-to-military relations with Taiwan are the root cause of Chen Shui-bian’s emboldened effort to challenge the status quo across the Taiwan Strait. In Chen’s first term, there was a steady “de-China-ization” of the island and accelerated efforts toward independence. Chen’s second election victory suggests any meaningful deal on the symbolic “one-China” consensus is beyond reach. Chen’s self-imposed time-line to revise the constitution of the Republic of China in 2006 is seen as a decisive move toward nominal independence.

Heightened Military Preparations

The frozen political relations across the Taiwan Strait contrasts sharply with heightened military preparations by all sides. In mid-July, the mainland unusually publicized its annual drills in the Dong Shan Islands across the Strait, which were the largest in the past eight years, involving 18,000 troops and almost all the high-tech ware in the PLA inventory. While the declared goal for the offshore exercise is to gain air and sea superiority over Taiwan rather than the usual focus on amphibious landing, PLA paratroopers are reportedly perfecting their skills in western China, where the PLA is also testing its ballistic missiles: mobile long-range *Dongfeng 31*, medium-range *Dongfeng 21*, and *Julang-2* submarine-launched ballistic missiles.

Taiwan, too, is gearing up for the worst scenario. Following its annual *Hanguang* drill in June, Taiwan’s air force tested in mid-July emergency landings and takeoffs of its *Mirage-2000* fighter jets on highways, a practice last conducted in 1978. Taiwan has in the past four years held the most frequent military exercises in the world, totaling over 400 and averaging 47 large-scale drills per year. The high-profile “fact-finding” U.S. trip in June by the speaker of Taiwan’s Legislative Yuan Wang Jin-pyng was the finishing touch for the \$18.2 billion military procurement including *Patriot* antimissile batteries, submarines, and anti-sub planes.

To prepare for the worst, Taiwan is working with both Singapore and the Philippines to evacuate its leaders in times of war.

While the mainland and Taiwan are working toward a certain eventuality, July will also see an unprecedented U.S. naval exercise in the western Pacific, where seven out of 12 U.S. aircraft carriers are positioning themselves within striking distance of China, culminating a month-long drill in various oceans of the world.

Prelude To What?

Rice’s July visit to Beijing, coupled with Vice President Dick Cheney’s unexpected rescheduling of a three-day visit to China in mid-April, were described as “strategic dialogues” with China. In both cases, the U.S. was more interested in the Korean issue while Beijing made Taiwan its priority.

In addition to their divergent strategic priorities, a new, and certainly heightened, psychological war of words is underway. In June, U.S. defense planners speculated that, in the event of a war across the Taiwan Strait, Taiwan might try to hit “high-value targets” like the huge Three Gorges Dam to deter a Chinese invasion. PRC scholars reacted with anger, and said the U.S. idea was irresponsible and genocidal, and would lead to the total destruction of Taiwan.

The May 17 statement by the Mainland’s Taiwan Affairs Office, released three days before Chen’s second inauguration, is now being interpreted repeatedly by PRC officials and scholars as an “ultimatum.” Some analysts are arguing for an earlier, presumably limited and controllable, use of force (such as the Israeli-Palestine conflict), rather than a late, possibly larger and prolonged one (such as the Korean and Vietnam Wars) after the 2008 Olympics in Beijing.

In June, U.S. Adm. Thomas Fargo, commander of the U.S. Pacific Command, reportedly offered the visiting Taiwan parliamentary speaker Wang Jin-pyng an *Aegis*-equipped destroyer, the most advanced missile-defense system. In March, Fargo was also toying with the idea of deploying special forces in the Strait of Malacca, through which nearly 80 percent of China’s imported oil passes. [Editor’s note: U.S. Pacific Command officials refute these reports.]

Toward A Political Soft-landing

The inherently delicate and increasingly dangerous Taiwan problem is more likely to get worse in the coming months. The absence of the China or Taiwan issues in the U.S. presidential race is both superficial and ominous, as both Beijing and Washington still pay lip service to their “improved” relations after Sept. 11 while positioning themselves for a showdown. Such a state of affairs reflects the increasingly complex nature of Sino-U.S. relations: a broadening and deepening of economic and social exchanges

since the 1970s has been accompanied by an absence of genuine strategic dialogue and political trust.

The nature of the Taiwan conflict, however, is political rather than military. At stake is China's territorial integrity and national unity. The island was ceded to Japan after a lost war when China was weak. Most Chinese around the world simply cannot accept Taiwan's independence by balloting when China is on an historical rise. This sense of Chinese nationalism therefore has nothing to do with the nature of the Chinese political system, be it emperor-centered, republican, communist, or democratic.

At stake is also the co-existence of the two large powers across the Pacific in the 21st century. The Bush administration, which sticks with its "one-China" rhetoric, is seen by Beijing as more interested in "peace" at best and Taiwan's "peaceful independence" at worst. The unprecedented arms sales to Taiwan (\$18.2 billion) and the U.S.' redoubled efforts to expand Taiwan's international space puzzle many and anger even more in Beijing regarding U.S. lip service to the "one China" principle. At least in Taiwan, many interpret the U.S. military sales and posture as a guarantee for whatever the island does. For Beijing, if "one-China" is disappearing, so is peace.

A move toward the use of force regarding the Taiwan issue, however, does not necessarily mean the abandonment of peaceful means. China's May 17 statement both points to the dire consequences of Taiwan's independence (four points) and offers incentives (seven points) for more stable cross-Strait relations. China has recently lowered its expectations of a positive U.S. influence on the status quo across the Taiwan Strait, but it has not given up hope for U.S. leverage. By putting more weight on military means, Beijing hopes to get Washington's attention for a strategic understanding and framework with the U.S.

At a broader and systemic level, the overall Chinese foreign policy is to obtain a "peaceful rise" that will benefit both China's neighbors and other major powers including the U.S. China's recent rhetoric and behavior also recognize the leadership role of the U.S. in the world, the U.S. as a Pacific nation with legitimate interests and stakes, and that China is not opposed to the U.S. presence in the western Pacific.

It is unclear how U.S.-China strategic dialogues and strategic maneuvering will lead to a political soft-landing regarding Taiwan after the Iraq war and in the midst of negotiations on the North Korean nuclear issue.

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