



Effective U.S. diplomacy insures stability in Taiwan

by Robert Sutter

Overshadowed by the difficulties facing U.S. policy in the Korean Peninsula is the success of relatively quiet but effective U.S. diplomacy in East Asia's other major hotspot, the Taiwan Strait. Interviews with officials in Washington, Taipei, and Beijing in May-June 2005 make clear that the U.S. diplomatic interventions in late 2004 were critically important in changing what up to that point were weakly constrained moves by President Chen Shui-bian and his allies to pursue assertive pro-independence initiatives that China said risked war.

Crisis averted

Chinese and Taiwanese officials readily acknowledge that repeated public U.S. interventions against Chen's pro-independence stance prior to a December 2004 legislative election significantly turned Taiwanese public opinion, and opinion in the Taiwan government, away from an assertive pro-independence stance the president and his party had been pursuing since late 2003. Those interventions included statements by Secretary of State Colin Powell and Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage underlining limits on U.S. support for Taiwan, and statements by the spokespersons of the State Department and the White House highlighting differences with President Chen. U.S. officials note there also were strong private U.S. interventions.

The obvious difficulties with the United States combined with a setback in the December 2004 legislative elections prompt both Chen and the Democratic Progressive Party to revert to a lower profile on cross-Strait issues. Meanwhile, the pan-blue opposition and the Chinese government, which were relatively weak and ineffective in countering Chen's initiatives in 2003-2004, mobilized to exploit the new situation in ways that further constrained the Taiwan president.

The dramatic visits of pan-blue leaders Lien Chan and James Soong to China saw Chinese President Hu Jintao and other Chinese officials mute China's past insistence on reunification under the "one country, two systems" formula unpopular in Taiwan. Chinese officials and commentators also avoided reference to a possible timetable for reunification that was highlighted during the rule of Hu's predecessor, Jiang Zemin. President Hu and other Chinese officials instead focused on the need to avoid further steps toward Taiwan independence and offered a number of cross-Strait economic, cultural, education, and other benefits for the Taiwanese people.

Improved outlook

Looking out to the end of the Chen administration in May 2008, discussions with Taiwanese, Chinese, and U.S. officials

indicate that constraints on the pursuit of pro-independence initiatives that risk conflict with China will remain strong.

The U.S. will continue to loom large as a brake on Taiwanese policy and overall cross-Strait tensions. Bush administration policy appears set to follow existing efforts to deter China from attacking Taiwan and to deter Taiwan from unilaterally disrupting the status quo with provocative moves toward independence. This dual deterrence policy is balanced with appropriate U.S. reassurances to China of support for a "one-China policy" as defined by the U.S. opposition to Taiwan independence, and U.S. reassurances to Taiwan of continued support and protection. Although the Chinese military buildup across the Taiwan Strait continues, the Bush administration policy is seen as providing effective deterrence against Chinese attack. The more recent U.S. efforts to curb pro-independence moves by Chen and his administration also are widely viewed as effective.

The U.S. policy is seen as perhaps the main reason why cross-Strait tensions would remain within bounds until 2008. China would appear to have no good reason to confront U.S. forces barring a provocation from Taiwan. President Chen might see his interests well served by reviving pro-independence initiatives amid divided politics in Taiwan. However, anticipated U.S. intervention as seen in 2004 suggests that such a course will be viewed as politically damaging for Chen and his interests in Taiwan.

U.S. officials at the highest levels are said to be comfortable with the prevailing aspects in U.S. policy with China and Taiwan. President Bush appears to understand and fully embrace the policy that has been followed with greater consistency and rigor over the past year than in the earlier years of his administration. The goals of U.S. policy are limited. Unlike North Korea, the U.S. administration is not trying to change circumstances; rather it is trying to preserve stability by maintaining a rough status quo in cross-Strait relations. U.S. officials would like to see dialogue between the Taiwanese and Chinese governments as a means to reduce misunderstanding and ease tensions, and they are pressing behind the scenes for resumed dialogue. U.S. officials say they welcome agreements that would reduce tensions. However, the Bush administration seems to see no need to mediate between the two governments or to take other extraordinary efforts to "fix" the Taiwan problem. It sees risks in deeper U.S. involvement in cross-Strait relations. Those risks include serious complications in the Bush administration's relations with China, Taiwan, and the U.S. Congress at a time when U.S. foreign policy remains heavily focused on the difficulties in Iraq and the broader war on terrorism.

Meanwhile, there appears to be ample common ground between Taiwan and China to allow for progress on such

practical measures as China's recent positive initiatives toward Taiwan by allowing more Chinese tourists to visit Taiwan, Taiwan farmers to sell fruit in Chinese markets, and other increased exchanges and communications across the Strait. China's initiatives have been well received in Taiwan Taipei seems to see its interests best served by welcoming them. These steps appear likely to improve the atmosphere in cross-Strait relations, even if obstacles over the "one-China" principle and other issues continue to block formal dialogue between the two governments.

Washington is seeking flexibility by both sides to resume dialogue, and President Chen faces considerable domestic pressure to revive cross-Strait talks. Chinese leaders face little domestic pressure to resume talks with Chen, but they may calculate their long-term interests are best served by opening relations with the president when the latter is on the defensive and following a moderate course on cross-Strait issues.

Still, prevailing and anticipated circumstances make it hard to be optimistic about further improvements in cross-Strait relations. China's military buildup opposite Taiwan continues to grow rapidly. China-Taiwan rivalry and conflict in international affairs continues without let-up.

In China, the Hu Jintao leadership appears wary of taking positions at odds with longstanding nationalistic positions of Beijing that are backed by powerful leadership and popular sensitivities. Thus, in a related area of nationalistic sensitivity, President Hu's administration gave ground to popular antipathy toward Japanese policies and practices, allowing the trashing of Japanese diplomatic and business properties before gingerly moving to reestablish calm. The passage of the anti-secession law appeared counterproductive for China's policy toward Taiwan following Chen's setback in the December 2004 legislative elections, but Chinese officials claim that nationalistic sensitivity made it very difficult to halt the passage of the law. In this atmosphere, it appears less than likely that the Hu administration will make significant overtures to Chen, barring significant compromise by the Taiwan leader.

It is plausible that Chen may calculate that Taiwanese opinion has changed to such a degree that it is incumbent on him to move closer to China to insure that the DPP will remain a viable contender for political leadership in Taiwan in the years ahead. However, polling data and the results of the May 2005 National Assembly election show a continued sharp split in Taiwan politics between pan-green and pan-blue adherents over cross-Strait and other issues. If China makes no significant overtures to the Taiwan government and continues the strong military and diplomatic pressure widely seen as obnoxious by Taiwanese public opinion, President Chen may see the best political course to use Taiwanese sentiment against China and those pan-blue leaders that choose to collaborate with China.

In sum, prevailing circumstances – backed by the United States – provide assurances that cross-Strait tensions will stay within bounds and avoid military conflict for the next three years. There is more uncertainty in assessing how far the Taiwan and China governments might go in easing tensions and resolving differences, but developments are moving in

directions foreshadowing modest improvements – a far cry from the crisis in the Strait less than one year ago.

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