



Taiwan: The View from Southeast Asia

by Rodolfo C. Severino

The following is an abridged version of a speech recently presented in Taipei.

Because I am in Taiwan for the first time, I would like to take this opportunity to talk about Taiwan and how Southeast Asians view it. I have traveled quite extensively in all 10 member-countries of ASEAN and lived in six of them. Because of this, I believe that I have some feel for how Southeast Asians think about Taiwan.

Basically, two things come to mind when Southeast Asians think about Taiwan. The first is the maintenance of peace in the Taiwan Strait. The second is the economic opportunities that Taiwan represents in its relations with Southeast Asia.

Peace is the first of our concerns. Indeed, ASEAN was founded, above all, for the promotion of enduring peace in our region. It is in this same spirit that Southeast Asians value the maintenance of peace in the area of Taiwan, which is quite close to Southeast Asia. Peace across the Taiwan Strait means, to us, the political *status quo*. Beijing has made it clear that it is not ruling out the use of force to forestall any action by Taiwan that would substantially move it toward *de jure* independence, toward a separate legal national existence. Such a use of force would, in turn, draw in the United States and probably Japan.

We in Southeast Asia take China's position seriously. We, therefore, consider any move by Taiwan toward *de jure* independence for the island as something that could provoke conflict or, at the very least, shake the stability of the region. Southeast Asians oppose such a move. This position of ours arises not only from a practical desire to avoid the violent or destabilizing consequences of such a move by Taiwan. It also flows logically from the policy of every Southeast Asian state of recognizing China and Taiwan as, legally speaking, one country.

I am aware that the question of a national existence separate from China is a hot issue in the domestic politics of Taiwan, and I have no wish to get involved on one side or the other in this political debate. However, it also has international, especially regional, implications on which Taiwan's friends and neighbors cannot remain silent and from which they cannot afford to stand aloof.

At the same time, we understand the urge of Taiwan's people to participate more fully in the affairs of the world. Many of us sympathize with it. The people of Taiwan feel that they are entitled to play a larger role in the world by virtue of the enormous political and economic progress that they have

achieved. Moreover, the region and the world would benefit greatly from such enlarged participation in the practical realm.

Short of political independence, therefore, we believe – at least, I do – that Taiwan should be allowed to take part in certain international cooperative activities. The global and regional effort to prepare for and contain epidemics of contagious diseases, for example, would benefit from Taiwan's participation short of membership in the World Health Organization. Similarly, the marine and atmospheric environment knows no national boundaries or political nuances. Its management through international cooperation would be enhanced by Taiwan's involvement. Taiwan's institutions of learning and centers of thinking and research could contribute much to educational exchanges and cooperation. Why cannot Taiwan (or Hong Kong), with its enormous financial reserves, take part in the Chiang Mai Initiative or the Asian Bond Market Initiative, currently ASEAN Plus Three endeavors?

The Chiang Mai Initiative is a scheme in which ASEAN, China, Japan, and Korea subject the regional economy to constant surveillance and periodic scrutiny so as to avoid being taken by surprise by another financial crisis. To discourage speculative attacks on regional currencies, the scheme involves a network of bilateral currency swap and repurchase agreements that now number sixteen and have a total value of about \$80 billion. It is given technical support by the Asian Development Bank, of which Taiwan is a member.

After all, like Hong Kong, Taiwan, having its own currency, central bank, financial reserves, trade policy and customs jurisdiction, belongs to APEC and the World Trade Organization, as well as the ADB. Its representatives also participated in the unofficial workshops on managing potential conflicts in the South China Sea through the 1990s. Taiwanese participation in regional cooperation in practical areas, areas that are not overtly political, would be good not only for Taiwan but for the region as well.

I know that it is difficult to imagine such expanded participation in international affairs happening under present circumstances. It would be *impossible* to imagine if the prospect of it were to be blatantly invested with political significance; if it were presented or perceived as a significant step toward Taiwan's independence. Not so paradoxically, only by forswearing a separate national existence can Taiwan hope to gain the necessary support for its enhanced involvement in international or regional cooperative endeavors.

For a long time, Taiwan's economic linkages with almost all the countries of Southeast Asia have been solid and mutually beneficial, in several cases antedating Southeast Asia's close economic relations with the Chinese mainland. For most of Southeast Asia, Taiwan is an important trading

partner, a productive source of investments and technology, and a wellspring of tourists. There is no reason why such a mutually profitable economic relationship cannot continue indefinitely and even expand.

However, that relationship should not be politicized if it is to endure. Trial balloons have been floated about possible free-trade-area agreements between Taiwan and some Southeast Asian countries. There may be ways of achieving the commercial objectives of such agreements without implying that Taiwan is a sovereign state. In any case, one has to be extremely careful in doing so on account of the political implications.

I do not see the validity of the observation that Taiwan is somehow left out of the economic scheme of things in East Asia simply because it is not entering into FTA agreements similar to those that others are concluding. FTA agreements are essentially political documents. They send important messages to the bureaucracies of the parties involved, to their business sectors, and to the international community. But they are not essential for trade in goods, trade in services, investments, and tourism to flourish. In Taiwan's case, pursuing FTA agreements for political purposes, which may be appropriate to sovereign states, could, in fact, damage the substantive relationships that have been so beneficial for both Taiwan and Southeast Asia.

Being an inter-governmental organization, ASEAN does not find it proper to deal officially and as a regional entity with Taiwan in the same way that it conducts relations with sovereign states. However, Taiwan can relate with such ASEAN business organizations as the ASEAN Chambers of Commerce and Industry and the ASEAN Business Advisory Council. And, of course, corporations and business associations in Taiwan will continue their very active relationships with individual Southeast Asian countries. Ministers of some Southeast Asian countries have even led business delegations to Taiwan.

In sum, as a Southeast Asian, I view Taiwan in this way. Taiwan remains a valuable economic partner for all of Southeast Asia. It can contribute much to regional and international cooperative endeavors in many areas in a manner that does not imply a separate national existence. It should be able to do so. However, for the sake of regional peace and stability, I would like to see Taiwan avoiding any moves toward *de jure* independence.

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