



RESPONSE TO PACNET #21, “WHAT THE LATEST POLLS SAY ABOUT TAIWAN”

BY JOSEPH BOSCO AND DENNIS V. HICKEY

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Joseph Bosco replies:

In PacNet 21, Dennis Hickey argues that the latest polls on public opinion in Taiwan should caution the United States against making clear its commitment to defend Taiwan against Chinese aggression. He argues that the real danger to cross-strait stability is not the authoritarian expansionism of Communist China but the freedom-loving exuberance of democratic Taiwan. In fact, he would probably not consider a Chinese attack on Taiwan as aggression at all, but rather a perfectly predictable response to Taiwanese provocation.

The author also vigorously opposed Congress's enactment of the Taiwan Travel Act last year as needlessly provocative of Beijing. Congress and the president ignored that doomsday prediction then and should reject the advice this time as well.

The problem, as Hickey sees it, is that the recent opinion poll shows by a margin of 48.5 percent to 35.3 percent that Taiwanese believe the United States would come to the defense of Taiwan even if a

Chinese attack was precipitated by a declaration of independence. (The margin grows to 60 percent if the Chinese aggression was unprovoked.) The concern of Hickey and most in the foreign policy establishment – including administrations of both parties over the past four decades – is that the higher the degree of confidence among Taiwanese that the US will ride to the rescue, the greater the likelihood Taiwan will feel free to act recklessly and provoke a Chinese attack.

The argument would have greater force if the alternatives were simply stable *status quo* or Taiwanese provocation and Chinese reaction. But that is not the situation. It is not a static but a dynamic one. Time and demographic changes alone make the *status quo* inherently unstable. Older segments of Taiwan's population who identify as Chinese and feel bonds to China are dying off, while those in their 20s and younger have lived their entire lives as citizens of a separate, *de facto* independent Taiwan and identify as Taiwanese, not Chinese. At the same time, they see Beijing's treatment of Hong Kong citizens, let alone Tibetans, Uighurs, and a host of religious, spiritual, and political minorities, and they want no part of that political system, however wealthy some of its elite members may be.

Demographic changes to the *status quo* aside, Beijing antagonizes the population even further with its increasingly hostile actions pressing democratic Taiwan to submit to Chinese Communist rule. The Hickey argument fails to take into account that it is Beijing, every bit as much as the people of Taiwan, who are dissatisfied with the status quo. China's Anti-Secession Law, passed in 2005, made that clear when it proclaimed the unilateral "right" to attack Taiwan not only if it moves toward formal independence but also if it does nothing to advance the cause of "reunification." That itself, in CCP eyes, is justification enough for China's resort to force. It is why Xi Jinping said the Taiwan issue cannot be passed from one generation to another – and why Henry Kissinger, close confidant of all Chinese paramount leaders since Mao, warned Taiwan in 2007 that "China will not wait forever."

So, Hickey's call for Taiwanese restraint would be better directed to Beijing, and his advice to Washington not to encourage Taiwanese confidence

is entirely misplaced. The US government, should do exactly the opposite by declaring forthrightly and publicly that the United States will defend Taiwan against any Chinese aggression, regardless of whether Beijing deems itself “provoked.” China should know for certain that if it initiates conflict against Taiwan, it will find itself engaged in war with the US and that will destroy Xi’s “China Dream” far more completely and devastatingly than any Taiwanese declaration of independence could. It would be interesting to see a reliable poll on what the Chinese people would think of that choice.

Dennis V. Hickey replies to Joseph Bosco:

Mr. Bosco’s “rebuttal” is a disappointment. Let me explain.

Bosco’s first paragraph is a mixture of silliness and exaggeration. For example, he claims that I would “probably not consider a Chinese attack on Taiwan as aggression at all.” I am not going dignify such nonsense with a response.

In his second paragraph, Bosco rehashes his complaints about a piece I penned for PacNet last year (PacNet #8, 2018). I had compared the Taiwan Travel Act (and other meaningless legislation) to constructive policy initiatives such as the 1994 Taiwan Policy Review. I pointed out the new laws are “feel good” legislation – they don’t require a president to do anything. Bosco claims I made some sort of “doomsday prediction.” Untrue – never happened. Events proved my analysis correct. For example, no top US officials showed up at the AIT dedication. And there have been no port calls by US naval ships in Taiwan.

In his third paragraph, Bosco cites findings from the new TNSS poll showing a spike in the percentage of Taiwanese who believe the US will rescue Taiwan if it ignites a cross-strait conflict. And he complains that “the foreign policy establishment” has always looked at such developments with alarm. But this is because a Taiwan declaration of independence is sure to trigger a cross-strait war. And that is why the “foreign policy establishment” does not want to encourage the Taiwanese to do this. A lot of people will die.

In the fourth paragraph, Bosco tries to explain that there is no market in Taiwan for “one country, two systems” and no one on the island favors immediate reunification with the mainland. This is not news. He is rehashing a point made in my article.

In the fifth paragraph, Bosco criticizes Beijing’s behavior. And points out that the mainland would like to change the status quo. It is at this point that he ought to praise the Taiwan Relations Act. The law – which does not guarantee or rule out a US response to a conflict – serves to help restrain hotheads in *both* Taiwan and the PRC. As the saying goes, “uncertainty breeds restraint.”

In the sixth paragraph, Bosco finally gets to the point. He declares that he wants to upend four decades of successful US foreign policy. Bosco contends that the US should “forthrightly and publicly” declare it will defend Taiwan irrespective of the cause of the conflict. Wrong!

It is estimated that since Sept. 11, 2001, the US has spent \$6 trillion on wars that have killed 500,000 people. But it seems that some people just can’t get enough. Rather than embrace reckless policies that hold the potential to ignite regional or even global conflicts, it would be wise policy for Washington to continue to pursue an approach toward Taipei and Beijing that Richard Bush and others have described as “dual deterrence.” As for the lunatic fringe, it should be ignored.

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