

China-Taiwan Relations: Cross-Strait Cross-Fire

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Chen Shui-bian's victory on March 18, 2000 to become Taiwan's president-elect with 39.3 percent of the vote dramatically changes Taiwan's domestic political topology and thereby the assumptions and framework for China-Taiwan cross-Strait relations. Chen's victory also ended a fifty year Kuomintang reign over Taiwan, placing the Democratic Progressive Party behind the wheel for the first time. The election also served to heighten cross-Strait tension. Prior to the election, on February 21, China issued a White Paper on cross-Strait relations, taking a more aggressive rhetorical stance toward Taiwan. Since the election, Beijing seems to be taking a wait-and-see approach, but it is unclear just how long China will be content with simply watching events unfold.

Taiwan Elects Chen Shui-bian as President

A strong 82.7 percent of Taiwan's eligible voters cast ballots to elect Chen Shui-bian. Key factors in the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) election included: a split within the Kuomintang (KMT), Taiwan's ruling party; a strong showing by independent candidate James Soong (who carried 15 of Taiwan's counties with 36.8 percent of the vote); and the unique Taiwan electoral phenomenon of "strategic voting" and "ethnic counter-mobilization," which seemed to peel off support for KMT candidate Lien Chan from both sides. One result was increased votes in the north for Soong and in the south for Chen, particularly after Nobel Laureate Dr. Lee Yuan-tze's endorsement of Chen and PRC Premier Zhu Rongji's strong warnings.

Chen signaled early that he is aware of the need for caution. He also expressed his willingness to engage in cross-Strait discussions on terms appropriate to an elected representative not only of his party, but of all the people of Taiwan. Chen's approach, as his senior campaign strategists made clear at the March 29-30 CSIS Taiwan conference convened in Washington, D.C., was to counter assumptions on what he might do or believe by giving concrete, constructive suggestions. Three suggestions in particular were noted. First, Chen envisions an open-ended future for Taiwan. This moves to the future the question of Taiwan's political status -- whether some form of status quo, unification, or independence. Second, Chen says he will not call for a popular referendum on Taiwan's status unless militarily threatened by the PRC. Third, Chen stresses discussion and exchange across the Taiwan Strait are needed to clarify what the PRC means by "one-China." In this view, the "one-China" principle is an acceptable topic for discussion, including what it means, rather than a precondition for China-Taiwan discussion.

In the months preceding the Taiwan elections, both Beijing and Taipei sought to establish advantageous positions, both vis-à-vis the other and vis-à-vis the other in Washington. Washington and Beijing restored military-to-military relations after the accidental bombing of the PRC embassy in Belgrade through the January 24-26 Washington visit of General Xiong

Guangkai. The U.S. urged the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to be circumspect regarding the threat or use of military force, particularly around the time of Taiwan's elections. Washington was concerned lest Beijing scuttle its chances of winning U.S. Congressional support for Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) or force the Senate to pass the Taiwan Security Enhancement Act approved 341-70 by the House.

On March 6, in announcing the 2000 budget to the National People's Congress, PRC Finance Minister Xiang Huaicheng indicated a \$14.5 billion defense budget, a 12.7 percent increase from 1999, which does not include military procurement or research and development. On March 11-12, Beijing sailed its newly-delivered Sovremenny destroyer through the Taiwan Strait.

The White Paper

Preceding these events was China's February 21 State Council White Paper on "The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Issue." It was as if Beijing was responding to Lee Teng-hui's July 9, 1999 "special state-to-state relations" statement in the form of a paper missile. Like President Lee's "special state-to-state" comments, the PRC White Paper, though prepared in advance, came as a surprise. Those surprised included senior Clinton administration officials who had just complete a rocky visit to China and were not told during their trip about the White Paper. This left some U.S. analysts convinced that Beijing was sufficiently confident regarding Congressional PNTR approval and thereby decided to react strongly to the continued urging by the U.S. not to threaten force against Taiwan.

Like Lee's comments, the subsequent divergent Chinese interpretations of what the White Paper meant highlighted possible internal Chinese differences, or at least differing approaches to dealing with the strong reactions from the U.S. and others. And, like Lee's statement, the White Paper is a nuanced statement of principle ("one-China") and a tactical negotiating approach (it offers flexible PRC approaches to Taiwan's concerns for equality and functional topics preceding political ones).

Regarding "bottom-line" principle, it is worth reading the actual wording of the White Paper's three "ifs": "If a grave turn of events occurs leading to the separation of Taiwan from China in any name, or if Taiwan is invaded and occupied by foreign countries, or [and this was the new condition] if the Taiwan authorities refuse, *sine die*, the peaceful settlement of cross-Straits reunification through negotiations, then the Chinese Government will only be forced to adopt all drastic measures possible, including the use of force, to safeguard China's sovereignty and territorial integrity and fulfill the great cause of reunification."

Chinese officials hastened to interpret "*sine die*" to mean "indefinitely" instead of the more literal Latin "without a date." In his February 29 statement, Vice Premier Qian Qichen portrayed the White Paper as representing no dramatic change but rather continuity in PRC Taiwan policy. In so doing, Qian and others gave some relief to those worried that ascendant hardliners in Beijing were pushing forward with a timetable for cross-Strait unification talks, if not for unification itself.

For its part, in a statement issued February 22, Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council specifically rejected the PRC's contention that the Republic of China had ceased to exist in 1949 as "running totally contrary to reality." It also called for the PRC "to pragmatically return to the mutually agreed position of 'one-China, different interpretations'" as reached by the two sides in 1992. Such an approach purports to avoid a potential stalemate over who or what represents "one-China" as a means "to seek the best interests of the people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait and to resolve the present problems between them."

Sino-U.S.-Taiwan Relations

Questions arose on Taipei's ability to defend itself and on what the U.S. approach to balancing Sino-U.S.-Taiwan relations in a U.S. election year should entail. Spurred by media stories of the classified Pentagon study on Taiwan's ability to defend itself, these questions fed heated policy discussion about whether or not the U.S. should clarify any "strategic ambiguity" regarding its commitments to Taiwan. They also fed policy discussion about the related but different approaches of defense and deterrence in the current debate regarding U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, including whether or not the U.S. should make available to Taiwan Aegis-equipped Arleigh Burke-class destroyers, or other military hardware.

All this fits into a context of U.S. Congressional concerns on balancing U.S. election year politics with a possible Senate vote on the Taiwan Security Enhancement Act (TSEA). It also pertains to pending Congressional approval of Permanent Normal Trade Relations status for China when the timing of China's possible World Trade Organization (WTO) entry is left uncertain because China and the European Union have yet to close the WTO bilateral accessing agreement.

On March 8, President Clinton sent legislation forward to Congress formally calling for the U.S. to grant China PNTR. In his March 8 speech, President Clinton reiterated the longstanding U.S. position saying, "we will continue to reject the use of force as a means to resolve the Taiwan question, making absolutely clear that the issues between Beijing and Taiwan must be resolved peacefully and with the assent of the people of Taiwan." The President then discussed cross-Strait relations stating, "there must be a shift from threats to dialogue across the Taiwan Strait. And we will continue to encourage both sides to seize this opportunity after the Taiwan election." Regarding a Congressional trade vote, on March 10, House Speaker Dennis Hastert admitted, "We have some of our guys who because of [Chinese] saber rattling [on Taiwan] and other things are not as solid as they were before on free trade with China, including granting Permanent Normal Trade Relations status."

Implications

All eyes are turned on Chen Shui-bian as he prepares his May 20 presidential inaugural address and on leaders in Beijing as they seek to determine their approach to President-elect Chen, to the Democratic Progressive Party, and to the significant political realignment taking place in Taiwan. If ever there was a time for cautious patience, it is now. Deadline diplomacy-- the tendency to make each new deadline a crisis in cross-Strait relations -- can only create timetables for tension. Given the strong likelihood that timetables for tension will be counter-productive in

the search for long-term peace, prosperity, and stability across the Taiwan Strait, it is strongly preferable, as the Chinese expression says, for all involved to *tui yibu, hai kuo tian kung* (“take a step back and see how broad the oceans and how wide the heavens are”).

Chronology of China-Taiwan Relations January-March 2000

Jan. 6, 2000: Independent presidential candidate James Soong suggests Taiwan and China should sign a 30-year mutual non-aggression peace treaty.

Jan. 10, 2000: President Clinton announces an "all-out effort" to persuade Congress to grant China Permanent Normal of Trade Relations (PNTR).

Jan. 14, 2000: Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) Chairman Lin I-hsiung says that DPP presidential candidate Chen Shui-bian will not declare independence for Taiwan if he is elected.

Jan. 18, 2000: DPP presidential candidate Chen Shui-bian says he would consider signing peace treaties with the mainland under the framework of the UN Charter.

Jan. 24, 2000: Lt. Gen. Xiong Guangkai, deputy chief of the general staff of the PLA, holds three days of talks in Washington with U.S. Congress members, Defense Department officials, and administration officials to reestablish military-to-military ties. These were the first such talks since the Chinese embassy was mistakenly bombed in Belgrade on May 7, 1999.

Jan. 31, 2000: Lien Chan, Kuomintang (KMT) presidential candidate, makes a proposal to resolve Taipei's political dispute with rival Beijing, calling for a "peace zone" to be established in the Taiwan Strait.

Feb. 1, 2000: Taiwan Security Enhancement Act is passed in the U.S. House of Representatives by a vote of 341-70.

Feb. 6, 2000: China's Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Guangya launches a verbal attack on the U.S. government for its plans to develop a national system of anti-missile defense, saying this could provoke a new arms race.

Feb. 8, 2000: A U.S. Navy battle group docks in Hong Kong, granting 7,000 sailors shore leave in the biggest such port call since the Belgrade embassy accidental bombing.

Feb. 10, 2000: Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi states that the Japanese government hopes China and Taiwan will resolve their differences through peaceful means.

Feb. 11, 2000: U.S. State Department says it does not believe the purchase by China of a modern Russian 8,000-ton destroyer, equipped with SSN22 anti-ship missiles, poses a significant threat to the U.S. military. Lin Cheng-yi, a researcher at the Taiwan state-run Academia Sinica research center in Taipei, says the ship definitely poses a threat to U.S. and Taiwanese interests.

Feb. 16, 2000: The United States and Japan agree to continue research on a regional missile defense system, despite some progress in missile talks with North Korea.

Feb. 17, 2000: Vice President Lien Chan offers to visit China and engage in a “broad dialogue with the mainland leaders” if he is elected.

Feb. 18, 2000: U.S. Deputy Secretary Strobe Talbott, visiting Beijing for high-level talks including with Vice Premier Qian Qichen, spends much of his two days discussing Taiwan, U.S. arms sales to the island, and Washington's plans to build anti-missile shields.

Feb. 21, 2000: China publishes a White Paper that adds that if Taiwan refuses indefinitely to pursue “the peaceful settlement of cross-Straits reunification through negotiations,” the Chinese government will be “forced to adopt all drastic measures possible” against Taiwan.

Feb. 23, 2000: Walter Slocombe, a U.S. undersecretary of defense, says the Chinese policy statement is a “new and troubling formula.” In China, the *PLA Daily* quotes military specialists as urging China's 2.5 million soldiers to contribute to protecting the unity of the motherland.

Feb. 24, 2000: President Bill Clinton stresses that the United States will continue to reject the use of force as a means of resolving the Taiwan issue.

Feb. 27, 2000: *The New York Times* reports that China's shift to a more aggressive stance on Taiwan may increase pressure on the Clinton administration to consider new sales of sophisticated arms to Taiwan.

Feb. 29, 2000: China's defense minister, General Chi Hoatian, told the visiting commander of U.S. Pacific forces, Admiral Dennis Blair, that China will never commit not to use force.

Mar. 1, 2000: Vice Premier Qian Qichen says China's policy toward Taiwan has not changed and the so-called “additional condition” for Chinese use of force against Taiwan is not new.

Mar. 4, 2000: President Jiang Zemin says that China would take “drastic measures” against Taiwan if it delayed reunification talks indefinitely, while Prime Minister Zhu Rongji mentions peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue in the National People's Congress.

Mar. 6, 2000: In announcing his 2000 budget to the national legislature, Finance Minister Xiang Huaicheng says \$14.5 billion would be spent on defense, approximately a 12.7 percent increase above the previous year.

Mar. 8, 2000: U.S. President Bill Clinton says that China must “shift from threat to dialogue” in handling relations with Taiwan after the March 18 Taiwan election.

Mar. 15, 2000: China's Prime Minister Zhu Rongji, in a news conference, warns Taiwan voters to follow Beijing's preferences in Taiwan's coming presidential election: “Otherwise, I'm afraid you won't get another opportunity to regret.”

Mar. 18, 2000: Taiwanese voters end half a century of Nationalist Party rule and elect opposition leader Chen Shui-bian to the presidency.

Mar. 29, 2000: Taiwan's new President-elect Chen Shui-bian announces that his premier will be Lee Teng-hui's current Defense Minister Tang Fei.