

CHINA US Focus

While Washington Looks Elsewhere, Taiwan Tensions Grow

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It is no secret that the American political and policy communities are heavily focused on the Middle East, often under the broader topic of combating terrorism. This extreme emphasis became evident during the presidential debates as well as in speeches and interviews outside that format, and it remains so. The obsession with the Middle East means that crucial issues in other regions receive, at most, inconsistent and often superficial attention.

That has even been the case with East Asia, a region in which the United States has major economic and security stakes. Moreover, the extent to which developments in East Asia have received attention has mainly been focused on North Korea's nuclear and missile programs as well as China's behavior in the South China Sea. But there is another trend that deserves far more notice than it has received: the rapidly deteriorating ties between Taiwan and mainland China.

Some deterioration of relations between Beijing and Taipei was expected in light of the electoral triumph of the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in the January 2016 elections for Taiwan's presidency and legislature. Chinese leaders were unhappy about the victory of the DPP's Tsai Ing-wen as Taiwan's new president, even though she was not as strident in her advocacy of formal independence for the island as the last DPP president, Chen Shui-bian, had been. But the speed and extent of the deterioration has been an ominous surprise.

Even before she took office in May, Tsai, along with her supporters, were warned by Beijing that they must accept the so-called 1992 consensus stating that there was one China, however much the two sides might disagree about the specific definition of that concept. The pressure on Tsai and other key political players has continued unabated since she took office. Zhang Zhijun, the head of the Taiwan Affairs Office, put it bluntly to a visiting Taiwanese business delegation in late May, saying, "There is no future in Taiwan independence, and this cannot become an option for Taiwan's future. This is the conclusion of history." He added that "some people say you must pay attention to broad public opinion in Taiwan," but he would have none of that reasoning, arguing instead, "Taiwan society ought to understand and attach great importance to the feelings of the 1.37 billion residents of the mainland."

But Tsai and her government show no signs of being intimidated. Despite Beijing's insistence, she refused to embrace the 1992 consensus. Taipei has also taken a number of other actions that have greatly irritated, if not infuriated, Chinese leaders. Tsai's government has systematically boosted cordial ties with Japan—Beijing's arch-adversary—that stop just short of seeking a full-fledged security partnership. And perhaps most galling of all to Beijing, this year for the first time Taiwan held ceremonies marking the Tiananmen Square massacre.

Beijing has reacted petulantly to Tsai's behavior, most notably by severing the liaison relationship between the Taiwan Affairs Office and its Taiwanese counterpart. There are also indications that China may launch a fresh campaign to convince the handful of nations (mainly tiny states in the Caribbean and Africa) that still have diplomatic relations with Taipei to switch those ties to Beijing. The rhetoric directed against Tsai and the DPP has become noticeably shriller in recent weeks as well. Yet the rising tensions have not materially disrupted the economic relationship that had burgeoned between Taiwan and the mainland under Tsai's predecessor, the far more accommodating Ma Ying-jeou. But one wonders how long those ties can escape damage.

Tensions rose another notch on July 1 when the Taiwanese navy accidentally launched a missile in the Taiwan Strait toward the mainland. The supersonic Hsiung-feng III ("Brave Wind") anti-ship missile flew some 45 miles before striking a Taiwanese fishing trawler, killing the skipper and injuring three crew members. Beijing demanded an explanation, and a spokesman for the Taiwan Affairs Office charged that the incident "caused severe impact at a time when the mainland has repeatedly emphasized development of peaceful cross-strait relations." Still, the response was probably a pale version of what it would have been if the vessel had been Chinese.

U.S. leaders have become complacent about the Taiwan issue. It was easy to do so during the past eight years when the conciliatory Ma Ying-jeou and the Kuomintang Party ran the Taiwanese government. But those days are gone. We may be returning to the dangerous environment that existed during Chen Shui-bian's administration. Chen repeatedly pushed the envelope on Taiwan's de facto independence, often without alerting U.S. officials about his initiatives. Tensions surged in the Taiwan Strait, and Washington worried that they might spiral out of control.

If we are returning to such an environment, Americans need to focus on the relevant issues and ask themselves what level of risk they are willing to take to defend Taiwan. The United States has a vague, but substantive, obligation to assist the island under the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979. As China grows stronger militarily—and remains a crucial American trading and financial partner—do we want to risk a confrontation over Taiwan? Opinion polls in the United States indicate that over 60 percent of respondents would not want to go to war for that purpose. And presumptive GOP presidential nominee Donald Trump has certainly raised doubts about the reliability of Washington's continued security commitments to small Asian allies.

Whatever the decision, the Taiwan issue deserves far more attention than it is receiving in the United States. The ongoing obsession with the Middle East is obscuring worrisome developments in other regions that could prove quite deadly. Taiwan is moving up rapidly on that list.

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