



Forty years on: Whither the two Chinas?

Doug Bandow

January 3, 2019

With détente seeming to settle upon the Korean peninsula, East Asia's most dangerous flashpoint may now be Taiwan. Chinese President Xi Jinping is morphing into a better dressed version of Mao Zedong and reviving Mao-style policies throughout the People's Republic of China (PRC) and beyond. One of his targets, the subject of his New Year's address, is Taiwan.

Up until January 1, forty years ago, there were two Chinas. At least, until then the US formally recognised the Republic of China, located on the island of Taiwan, which claimed to be the legitimate government of all China. No one really believed that, and Washington had begun talking with Beijing in 1972. After that countries accelerated their shift in recognition from Taipei to Beijing.

The mainland's diplomatic advantage grew along with its economy. Today just 16 small, mostly African and Latin American nations, recognise the ROC, which has been denied independent status in international organisations as well. However, even that does not satisfy the Xi government, which wants "reunification". The island has been out of the mainland's control for more than 120 years, other than a brief period after World War II.

On New Year's Day, Xi gave a major speech addressing Taiwan, expressing his government's willingness "to use the greatest sincerity and expend the greatest hard work to strive for the prospect of peaceful reunification". However, he warned: "We do not promise to renounce the use of force and reserve the option to use all necessary measures [to achieve Beijing's ends]." Which sounds like American presidents who proclaim that "all options are on the table," code words threatening war.

Xi sought to paint a positive picture of Chinese control: "Taiwan will have lasting peace and the people will enjoy good and prosperous lives." Alas, he offered no guarantees to preserve Taiwan's free society and democratic system. Nor would any such promises be believable. Xi's turn toward totalitarianism, including the incarceration of more than a million Uyghurs in reeducation camps, creates a fearsome prospect for a united future. While he cited Hong Kong's "one country, two systems" framework as the model, Beijing has steadily tightened its control over that territory, despite pledging to preserve British-style liberties.

Even before Xi's reincarnation as Mao, the Taiwanese people turned decisively against "reunification" with China. A vanishingly small proportion of the young identify with the mainland. Their connection with the PRC is minimal; Taiwan is their home. And they have no reason to voluntarily choose what amounts to a foreign dictatorship, which during its worst times proved to be one of the bloodiest tyrannies in human history.

But even if the mainland were democratic, why would the Taiwanese want to be submerged in the neighbouring colossus? Take away the idea of defence against foreign invaders, and the only

country threatening to attack Taiwan is the PRC, there is no reason for the former to become just another brick in a Chinese imperial wall.

Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen spoke a day before Xi, insisting that his government respect Taiwanese liberty and democracy. Her party did badly in the recent elections, but that did not reflect a pro-Beijing surge, rather, domestic issues dominated. Taiwan's people recognise that a declaration of independence would risk war, so most support today's ambiguous status.

If the Chinese leadership was equally accommodating, the situation would be stable. But Xi, especially, appears determined to force a decision, which risks war and would significantly affect the rest of the region.

Although the PRC's military strength greatly exceeds that of Taiwan, an invasion would be difficult. Washington has, at best, an ambiguous military commitment to Taiwan; the president would not want war with the PRC, but would also be loath to walk away from an ally of more than seven decades. Economic sanctions, at least, would be inevitable; even Europe would likely respond to an attack on the island. Any victory by Beijing would be dearly bought.

Instead, all the players need to find a compromise. For instance, while continuing to claim full sovereignty over Taiwan, the PRC should affirm its commitment to peace and withdraw some of its missiles targeted on the island. While preparing to defend itself if necessary, Taipei should eschew policies that highlight its independent existence internationally. While the US should continue selling Taiwan weapons to deter attack, the former should pledge to neither seek bases on the island nor intervene in any conflict which might erupt between Beijing and Taipei.

The world is very different to 40 years ago. Unfortunately, the possibility of war over Taiwan is significantly greater today. Any military confrontation would be a disaster to all concerned. Perhaps the best China, Taiwan, and America can do is peacefully kick the controversy down the road — again.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.