

CHINA US Focus

Should China Consider the “Finland Option” for Taiwan?

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After nearly eight years of merciful quiescence, the Taiwan issue threatens again to become a source of dangerous tension. Angry demonstrations by young Taiwanese over the past year, charging that the government of lame-duck leader Ma Ying-jeou has been too accommodating toward Beijing, is one prominent indication of trouble. The probable victory of the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party in next month’s elections underscores the extent of the dissatisfaction on the island. And with an impeccable sense of inappropriate timing, the Obama administration has chosen this moment to approve a major arms sale to Taipei, over Beijing’s strenuous objections.

We need to ask if there is a way to break the cycle of tension that threatens to lead to an armed clash in the Taiwan Strait that would benefit no one. Breaking the cycle, however, requires bold initiatives that mean abandoning deeply held desires in China, Taiwan, and the United States. Such a solution entails a compromise that would fully satisfy no faction. It would, however, have the considerable virtue of putting an end to the atmosphere of crisis and eliminate the danger of a war between China and the United States over the issue.

China’s historical grievance regarding Taiwan is clear and substantial. Japan stole the territory from China in the 1895 war, and Washington’s deployment of the Seventh Fleet in the Taiwan Strait in 1950 and the years following prevented Mao Zedong’s forces from having any chance of completing their victory over Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist remnant on Taiwan.

But while such episodes may indeed have constituted exploitive colonialism in the first case and unwarranted meddling in the second, they do not diminish the reality that Taiwan’s development has occurred quite separately from the Chinese mainland now for most of the past 120 years. Economically, politically, and culturally, Taiwan is a distinct society, very different from the PRC.

Public opinion surveys on Taiwan show almost no support for political unification with the mainland as long as China remains a one-party state. Most Taiwanese favor the status quo of de facto independence, but a substantial percentage would like to move to formal independence—if the danger did not exist that China would use force to prevent such a move. Even if the mainland transitioned to a Western-style democratic system, Taiwanese are ambivalent about reunification.

A good many Taiwanese would still prefer to run their own affairs rather than see their island become merely one small province (and the inevitable tax cow) in a very large country.

In short, Beijing would face (at best) a resentful, disgruntled population if it attempted to compel a reluctant Taiwan to accept reunification. And any effort to coerce Taipei will lead to a crisis with the United States. But there may be another way for China to protect its core interests without incurring such dangerous headaches.

Understandably, Beijing does not want to see Taiwan used as an economic—and especially as a military—client of another major power. Aside from the issue of national pride (which is considerable), that consideration is the main impediment to PRC officials even considering the option of recognizing Taiwan's independence.

But fears of foreign economic displacement over overblown. Powerful economic forces will continue to encourage the development of cross-strait commercial ties. Indeed, without the worries on Taiwan that such links are an insidious “Trojan Horse” designed to undermine Taiwan's self-government, those relations are likely to expand further and faster.

Chinese leaders should perhaps at least think about the previously unthinkable: accepting an independent Taiwan—under very strict conditions. The model for such an option would be Finland during the Cold War. In marked contrast to Moscow's rigid control over its East European satellite empire, the Kremlin allowed Finland to run its own affairs—within definite limits. Finland had a Western-style, fully democratic political system with multiple political parties and competitive elections. But Helsinki could not join a hostile alliance or allow foreign troops or bases to be stationed on its territory. It could not side with anti-Soviet powers in international disputes—or even vote with such countries on contentious matters in the United Nations. It was independence with a leash.

Could such a model work with Taiwan? It would, of course, require a painful concession on Beijing's part: giving up the long-standing claim of sovereignty to territory that was indeed stolen from China through an act of aggression. And certainly it would require major safeguards. At a minimum, Chinese leaders would want written assurances that Taipei would join no foreign alliances or accept any military presence from the United States, Japan, or other countries. Indeed, it would be logical for the PRC to insist on its own air and naval bases on Taiwan to protect Chinese security interests and be certain that the island could never be used as a staging area for moves against the mainland.

As indicated earlier, almost no one would be entirely happy with such a proposal. Chinese patriots would not like giving up the claim of sovereignty to Taiwan. DPP partisans would not like the constraints on Taiwan's independence. U.S. officials definitely would not like the prospect of PRC air and naval bases on the island or the very concept of Taiwan as a PRC protectorate.

There are no perfect solutions. Compromises, by their very nature, are imperfect. But if we don't “think outside the box” regarding Taiwan, we are in danger of careening toward disaster. The current situation in which the mainland insists that reunification must take place someday, and

the Taiwanese (backed by the United States) insist that it will not take place without their consent (which will never be forthcoming) is not likely to turn out well. The only question is when, not if, an ugly military clash takes place. We need to take meaningful steps now to avoid such a tragic scenario.

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