

## The Taiwan Issue Shows Signs of Re-Igniting

By Ted Galen Carpenter  
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One bright spot in an increasingly tense security environment in East Asia has been the relative calm in the Taiwan Strait. There are indications, though, that the recent period of quiescence may be coming to an end. If that occurs, the already worrisome situation in the region could become markedly worse.

Just a few years ago, the Taiwan issue was at the forefront of worries about a possible outbreak of conflict in East Asia. Under the leadership of Chen Shui-bian and his Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) during the period from 2000 to 2008, Taiwan pursued measures to increase its de facto independence from the mainland and lay the foundation for a more formal separation. Beijing reacted badly to Taipei's behavior, leading to a series of crises that alarmed the United States, Taiwan's protector.

The return of the more moderate Kuomintang Party (KMT) to power with the election of Ma Ying-jeou as Chen's successor in 2008 served to calm the situation. Even many Taiwanese who were strongly opposed to any notion of reunification with the mainland had become worried about Chen's strident, confrontational approach. By contrast, Ma steadily increased Taiwan's economic links with the mainland, and the atmosphere of extreme tensions dissipated. Mainland tourists began coming to the island in substantial numbers, and in early 2014, the first official bilateral meeting took place between Chinese and KMT officials since the 1949 communist revolution on the mainland.

Over the past year, though, there has been growing push back from domestic constituencies in response to Ma's conciliatory approach toward Beijing. Whereas key opinion sectors once feared that Chen's confrontational strategy was excessively risky, the worry now seems to be that Ma's strategy may be too soft—that he is allowing Taiwan to be drawn inexorably into Beijing's orbit. Most Taiwanese do not want tense, hostile relations with the mainland, but neither do they wish to see Taiwan's ability to run its own affairs undermined.

Angry demonstrations erupted in March 2014 in response to a new trade deal between Taipei and Beijing, which opponents argued would give China far too much influence over Taiwan's economy. The disorders culminated with an occupation of Taiwan's legislature that lasted nearly a week. That occupation was accompanied by massive street demonstrations—the largest since 2008—that persisted for nearly a month. Public anger reached the boiling point when police cleared the chamber as well as forcing demonstrators to leave the street behind the parliament building. The resulting melee injured more than 70 people.

Even the KMT government seemed taken aback by the extent and vitriol of the demonstrations, and political leaders have begun to respond to the growing public backlash to the soft policy toward Beijing. In late June, Zhang Zhijun, China's first ministerial-level visitor to the island since 1949 received a cordial reception but also a similar message in nearly every meeting he held with Taiwanese officials. The message was that while friendly relations with the mainland were wanted, Taiwan would determine its own political status. A spokesman for Wang Yu-chi, the principal official in charge of Taipei's cross-strait policy, emphasized that point. "Taiwan's future should under the constitution be decided by Taiwan's 23 million people. This is also the consensus of the Taiwanese people. We hope mainland China can give us that respect."

Such comments were a firm rejection of the statement that Fan Liqing, spokeswoman for the Beijing government's Taiwan Affairs Office, made on the eve of Zhang's departure for Taipei. She emphasized that the island's relationship to China must be "decided by all Chinese," not just the people of Taiwan. In practical terms, that would give Beijing a veto over any Taiwanese aspirations for independence, or even long-term political autonomy.

Ma's government has also redoubled its efforts to gain more capable weapons from the United States to improve the island's defense. In late March, U.S. officials responded to pressure coming from both Taipei and its supporters in the U.S. Congress and adopted a formula to upgrade Taiwan's F-16 fighters with new radars and other enhancements. Beijing, not surprisingly, was most displeased with that move.

We are still a considerable distance away from returning to the poisonous atmosphere that dominated interactions between Taiwan and the mainland during Chen's presidency. Even most DPP partisans have pulled back somewhat from their calls for efforts to secure Taiwan's independence. But the underlying disagreement about Taiwan's political status remains unresolved, with few signs of meaningful, constructive movement on that contentious issue. And a large segment of the population seems to believe that Ma may have become too conciliatory toward Beijing. The Taiwan issue is poised to return to greater prominence, and given the assortment of nasty spats that already exist in the region, that is not good news.

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