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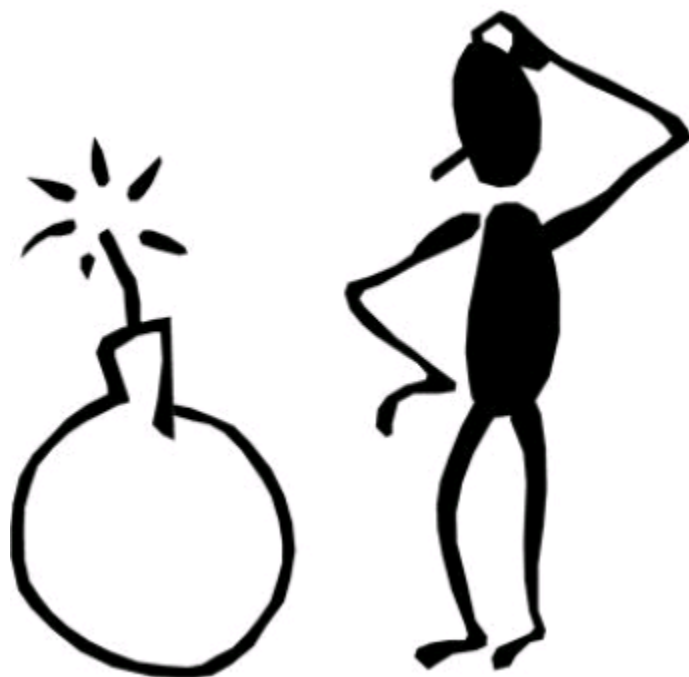
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## Would China Really Just Shrug at U.S.-Sponsored Taiwan Independence?

| [More](#) <sup>[1]</sup>

| June 24, 2011

| [Justin Logan](#) <sup>[2]</sup>



Yesterday I participated in an event sponsored by the [Center for National Policy](#) <sup>[3]</sup> about “Arming Taiwan.” (*Taipei Times* writeup [here](#) <sup>[4]</sup>.) Also participating were Joe Bosco, who worked as a China desk officer in the Pentagon of Bush the Younger, and Rupert Hammond-Chambers of the US-Taiwan Business Council.

My remarks were focused fairly narrowly on the shifting cross-strait military balance and Taiwan’s role in Taiwan’s defense, but in conclusion I urged two broad changes, one for Washington and another for Taipei.

For Washington, I argued that those who believe—as I do—that East Asia is likely to be the most important economic, political and military region of the world in coming decades need to

make that argument in the face of a Beltway that is monomaniacally focused on nation-building in the Islamic world and fiddling around in the Middle East more generally.

For Taipei, I argued that what is needed is a “wholesale change in national attitude on the island about the threat posed by the PRC and the policies that should be embraced in order to influence the outcome.” As the *Times* noted in its writeup, however, I suggested, based on the economic theory of alliances [5], that this change in Taiwan was unlikely to happen as long as Washington maintains the status quo in terms of its policy.

I didn’t want to get too far outside my lane at the event, but now that there’s a writeup in the public record, I wanted to comment on one suggestion that Joe Bosco made in his remarks: that the United States should make a formal commitment to defend Taiwan.

Bosco argued that Washington should do so and could simply wave off the PRC, informing them that “prudent choice for China” would be to “learn to get along with its neighbors and respect the international norm.” (It was not clear from his remarks whether there would be any limit to that commitment or whether Bosco would use the U.S. military to defend Taiwan even if conflict was precipitated by, say, a formal declaration of independence in Taipei.)

I think this is extraordinarily risky. Bosco was right to point out that there are downsides to our policy of “strategic ambiguity” on Taiwan. For my part, I believe that what exists at the present is close to the opposite of how you would want ambiguity to work. In the context of Taiwan, ambiguity would be effective if the PRC believed it was likely that Washington would come to Taipei’s defense and Taipei feared we would not do so. Such perceptions should induce caution on both sides and allow the status quo to persist. In my view, based on Taiwan’s military posture and Beijing’s behavior, something close to the opposite is coming to exist: Beijing increasingly doubts America’s willingness to fight over Taiwan and Taipei appears to firmly believe that we would do so.

This is a recipe for trouble. But the solution to the problems of ambiguity is not necessarily to make much more certain the prospect of conflict. Bosco rejected the idea that a formal commitment to defend Taiwan would make war likely. He seemed to believe that the PRC would have no choice but to shrug its shoulders and perhaps send a diplomatic demarche or two in response.

Bosco’s thinking on the subject seems to me fairly representative of people working on China at the Pentagon. It is one thing to believe that the United States and China may be headed for trouble. It is another thing entirely to propose policy steps that would threaten to plunge the two countries headlong into near-term conflict, without even acknowledging that that is the likely consequence of the policy being proposed.

More by

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