

THE TAIWAN IMBROGLIO

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Abstract

Maintaining peace and tranquility in the Taiwan Strait is of utmost importance to neighbouring countries and all interested parties, though it remains fragile. The US policy of deterrence has helped maintain the status quo by deterring China from threatening to annex Taiwan while assuring China that the US would not support Taiwan's independence. However, the status quo of maintaining peace in the island nation is shifting due to several factors. While China's 'One China Policy'¹ asserts that Taiwan is an inherent part of its territory, Taiwan's growing self-identity as a distinct democratic society rejects the 'One Country, Two Systems'² stance. At the same time, Taiwanese are increasingly concerned about regional security with their neighbours and in the Asia Pacific region. In this context, achieving true peace in the region remains ambiguous. This paper makes an attempt to visualise multiple scenarios that could shape the Taiwan Strait to maintain peace over the next few decades.

Keywords: Deterrence, One-China Policy, PRC-China, ROC-Taiwan, Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), United States and its Allies in Northeast Asia

Introduction

For much of imperial history, Chinese dynasties treated Taiwan, formerly known as Formosa³, as a peripheral frontier. It was much later that Taiwan became geopolitically important, with recognition of the island's vital role in maritime defence and regional security. As a territory, Taiwan was of little significance to the Chinese leadership for almost five millennia (Studeman, 2000). From the Ming to the Qing dynasties, waves of migration took place in Taiwan. It took more than 40 years for the Qing to build the necessary sea power to bring Taiwan under them (ibid). In 1683, a Qing admiral leading a fleet finally secured victory in a battle over the Penghu Islands, located 30 miles off Taiwan's southern coast (ibid). Taiwan became a province of the Qing dynasty of China from 1887 to 1895 (Rigger, 2019). However, it was detached from China in April 1895 after the First Sino-Japanese War (Rigger, 2019), when the Qing dynasty was forced to sign the Treaty of Shimonoseki, which ceded Taiwan and made it a Japanese colony. At the end of World War II in 1945, it was returned to China through retrocession

¹ This policy has its roots in the Cold War, when Chiang Kai-shek asserted that he would not coexist with Mao's China (Shattuck, 2020). Taiwan, officially known as the Republic of China (ROC), was recognised as the only legitimate Chinese government until the United Nations General Assembly passed Resolution 2758 in 1971 (Hsieh, 2009; Shattuck, 2020). After being deprived of its seat in international organisations like the UN, Taiwan stands in a vacuum to many foreign states. It was creating a vague concept for many nations. Even today, Taiwan has diplomatic allies with 15 countries, whereas 180 countries maintain such ties with the PRC (Shattuck, 2020), though many countries maintain strong economic ties with Taiwan. Further, in 2016, seven countries shifted ties from Taipei to Beijing, followed by Solomon Islands in 2019, which had diplomatic relations with Taipei for 36 years, because Beijing was actively pressuring those nations having diplomatic allies with Taipei, whereby the Tsai administration accused it of chequebook or dollar diplomacy, which Beijing lured them away by reducing Taipei's allies with them (ibid). Beijing used its diplomacy by flooding the country with financial assistance through loans, contracts and aid, to suppress allegiance to Taipei. This is how scholars observed that Beijing tries to demoralise Taipei to accept the 'one country, two systems' principle. It can be viewed that this is not a setback for Taipei alone but poses challenges to Washington's regional diplomacy.

² The reunification model proposed by Deng Xiaoping. Initially designed for Taiwan, it was implemented in Hong Kong first upon its return to China from Britain in 1997. However, the model identified a problem in Hong Kong, as seen in the scenarios from 2010 to 2020 (Taiwan News Agency, 2020).

³ The name was given by the Portuguese during the 16th century, when sailors discovered the Island was very beautiful and named it Ilha Formosa, meaning 'Beautiful Island.' This name eventually replaced all other names up to the early 20th century. It appears to have been the most common name for Taiwan in Europe. Sometimes it is also referred to as the Republic of Formosa, which is called today as Taiwan (Wees, 2019).

(ibid); with the San Francisco Peace Treaty of September 1951 and the Treaty of Peace between Japan and the Republic of China of 1952 (Swanström & Lea 2020). However, Taiwan did not become part of the PRC. China considers Taiwan one of its provinces in its nationalist view since then. Coincidentally, following the defeat of the Chinese Nationalists by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the Civil War, the Republic of China (ROC) was established under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek, who fled to Taiwan in December 1949 with his son, Chiang Ching-kuo. Once they had retreated to Taiwan, the KMT still faced threats from the PRC. Chiang Kai-shek enacted martial law with limited dissent.

The Chinese Nationalists naturally considered themselves Chinese and continued to use Taiwan as a strategic base for launching a counterattack during the civil war. From 1949 to 1987, Taiwan remained under an authoritarian government and underwent democratisation in the 1980s and 1990s. It was in 1996, the direct presidential and vice-presidential elections were held in Taiwan (Bellows, 1996). Thus, it changed the Taiwanese public's perception of democratic values. Robert A. Scalapino, an American political scientist, once opined that a temporary dictatorial system in small countries was necessary to achieve high economic growth, which then led to the establishment of democracy in those countries. Democracy survived against the odds, or else made a comeback after a certain period of interruption (Scalapino, 1993), as seen in the cases of Taiwan and South Korea.

Switching of US Diplomatic Allegiance from Taiwan to China in 1979

Towards the end of the 1960s, with a view to maintaining global balance, the US wanted to improve Sino-US relations. So, in the early 1970s, Chairman Mao Zedong and Premier Zhou Enlai sent a message to the US through Edgar Snow, inviting the American Table Tennis Teams to visit China (Ministry of Foreign Affairs). Eventually, on 21 April, China issued a verbal invitation to the US government regarding the US proposal to hold a high-level dialogue. The US sent the then US Secretary of State, Mr. Kissinger, for a preliminary secret visit from 9 to 11 July 1971 (ibid). Subsequently, President Nixon and his team arrived in China in February 1972 and paid a seven-day historic visit. During the visit, Nixon met with Mao Zedong, and the Chairman talked with Prime Minister Zhou Enlai (Burr, 2003).

During this trip, the US brought along the Nixon team to show its willingness to maintain contact and normalise Sino-US relations. China and the US jointly declared the Sino-US Joint Communiqué declaration entailing that Taiwan is a province of China and must be with China and that liberation of Taiwan is an internal matter of China, which no country has the right to interfere (ibid). Further, the US forces and military installations should be withdrawn from Taiwan. And China made it clear that any activity that encourages 'One-China, one Taiwan' or two countries, or the independent Taiwan theory, is firmly opposed. To which the US accepted that there is only one China and that Taiwan is a part of it. And that reaffirms its interest in a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question by China itself. Further, the US agreed to withdraw its forces and military installations from Taiwan. However, the US assured Beijing that it would not support Taiwan's independence movement, but could not suppress it.

The US has established diplomatic relations with the PRC since 1949 and de-recognised the Taiwan government in 1979. In response, the US Congress passed the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA)⁴ in April 1979 under President Jimmy Carter, although it did not satisfy any of them (Rigger, 2019). The law gave Taiwan a unique position, which was neither formally recognised nor completely de-recognised. Taiwan has been under the protection of the US until now,

⁴ It defines its goal as helping maintain peace, security, and stability in the Western Pacific and promoting the foreign policy of the United States, authorising relations between the US and the Taiwan Strait. The act acts as a form of Quasi-official diplomatic relations and addresses Taiwan's perilous security issues (Rigger, 2019).

ensuring its security. To that end, America has also agreed to sell and strengthen advanced arms to defend against external threats. This also allows Taiwan to secure democracy and a prosperous economy without provoking China. Despite the US's diplomatic relationship with the PRC, the US continues with the de facto relationship with Taiwan and continues to sell arms from time to time for defensive capabilities in countering China, though the US has agreed not to encourage Taiwan's independence. This led to the deadlock between China and Taiwan. At the same time, the US tactfully tries to maintain the balance between Beijing and Taipei. The ambiguity lies in the US's vague commitment to its stance if China were to invade, given the status quo, how the US will defend Taiwan, which Christensen called 'strategic ambiguity' (Christensen, 2002). How long this limbo continues is ambiguous for all.

China considers Taiwan as part of China; it maintains sovereignty over Taiwan and prefers to preserve peace rather than the status quo⁵ (Lin, 2011). China continues to consider Taiwan as part of China and wants to integrate through peaceful means and, if necessary, by the use of force. However, the latter will be extremely risky, leading to dire consequences. Therefore, Taiwan has become a flashpoint in the Indo-Pacific region. And, although TRA has remained unchallenged for the past four decades, China's rising economic and military power is posing new challenges for Taiwan, the US, and all interested parties. Over the last two decades, China's military capabilities in the Taiwan Strait have advanced significantly (Heginbotham, 2015), thereby shifting the status quo. This shift may render TRA less significant if the pace continues in the same direction.

China's modernisation of its weapons programme since the 1990s has toughened its stance on the 'One China Policy' (Hsieh, 2009). In 2004, China's Taiwan Affairs Office issued a statement for the first time that preventing Taiwan's independence was a priority in China's Taiwan policy. And, in March 2005, the Anti-Secession Law was passed at the third conference of the Tenth National People's Congress (Dittmer, 2017). The intensifying threat from Beijing became apparent when President Tsai Ing-wen took office in 2016, representing the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). PRC leadership doubts Tsai's commitment to the One China principle in some of her addresses since she took office as President. Her non-commitment had proved to the PRC's leadership that the PRC's communication with Taiwan was thus suspended (Rigger, 2019). She did not clearly commit to the One-China principle. Her idea is to defend Taiwan's sovereignty and avoid being caged in by the One China framework, while remaining cautious not to provoke China. However, China has a long-unfulfilled mission to unify under the One-China policy, a mission that the current leadership, which came to power in 2012, has yet to fulfil. In its political doctrines, it has called for the unification of Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan with China's full legitimacy. Yet, the TRA may lose its significance if the pace continues in the same direction.

Simultaneously with the shift in the status quo, there is a growing Taiwanese identity, which they consider distinct from Chinese identity in its values. There is also a growing consciousness of the history of separation in 1949. It is also observed that the Taiwanese have increasingly identified themselves as Taiwanese.

South China Sea Issues

⁵ It is neither part of China nor an independent sovereign state, which is what many Taiwanese would like to remain. Though the status quo is defensive, it might provoke an avoidable conflict, and they must be reassured (Christensen 2002).

Like the Taiwan Straits, the other flashpoint involves both China and Taiwan. Over the past few decades, China has built up massive, remarkable military capabilities along with its economic growth. Stemming from the high economic growth and the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, it has grown with confidence derived from military prowess. Recently, China has started flexing its military muscles to expand its territory beyond its borders. China has a border dispute with Japan and claims almost the entire South China Sea (SCS), though some countries in the ASEAN grouping have competing claims to this oceanic area that falls within their exclusive economic zones. For example, the Philippines, Brunei, Vietnam and Taiwan. This situation itself created another flashpoint when Taiwan is involved, as regional security is at stake. So diplomacy is the most ideal option for all stakeholders to manage the potential conflict entering Taiwan, thereby maintaining their existing equilibrium. Any conflict involving Taiwan or the SCS will have a severe, negative impact on almost all Asian countries and disrupt maritime trade in the South China Sea, over which trillions of dollars of cargo transit every single day (Aveivey, 2017). The SCS remains the economic lifeline of major economies such as Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and China, whose cargoes, both exports and imports, flow through this oceanic space, which is a global common. If this is the case, what options does China have to prevent the Taiwan issue from being blown out of proportion and disrupting the region's existing security order?

Reaction from US Allies in Northeast Asia, viz. Japan and South Korea

Japan and South Korea, America's allies in Northeast Asia, also support Taiwan. Both have trade interests with Taiwan, as it is the world's largest semiconductor producer. However, based on the past, Taiwan-Japan relations have been strained somewhat since the PRC became a sovereign state in 1972. Japan has maintained unofficial relations and non-governmental ties with Taiwan. In January 2017, the two embassies were renamed into "the Japan-Taiwan Exchange Association" and "the Taiwan-Japan Relations Association" respectively, which attracted criticism from China (Swanström & Lea, 2020). At the same time, relations between the two are under enormous pressure from Beijing, as China seeks to have all countries end official diplomatic ties with Taiwan. Nevertheless, Japan and Taiwan were able to develop quasi-diplomatic relations.

During the 1960s, Japan's economy grew, and it focused on labour-intensive industries such as steel, automobiles, and textiles. This has led to high growth and an income-doubling plan (IDP) economy (Shinohara, 1964). The plan was so successful. As a result, Japan's economy boomed, and it then relocated labour-intensive industries to Singapore, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Then Japan began focusing on knowledge-intensive industries such as computers, semiconductors, electronics, and software. Japanese manufacturers looked to Taiwan as a base for assembling manufactured exports. The period spanning the 1980s and the early 1990s saw the rise of cross-border partnerships. Further, from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, Japanese cooperation began to develop a stronger relationship with the Taiwanese industry as their operations expanded into other Asian countries (Tar, 2014). Thus, Taiwan has become one of the largest beneficiaries of this Japanese economic boom.

Japan invested 500 million US dollars in 1972 in Taiwan. Between 1972 and 1980, Taiwan's trade deficit was high (Dolan, 2002). However, Japan reduced its exports to Taiwan, allowing Taiwan to increase their exports to Japan. Then Taiwan's trade with Japan increased threefold between 1985 and 1989. This elevated trade level continued until 1992, reaching \$30.7 billion (ibid).

Under the Japanese principle of *seikei bunri*, in which political and economic policies are pursued separately, Japan has successfully maintained friendly relations with both Taiwan and China (Dolan, 2002). Japan was able to establish the Interchange Association with Taiwan and open a *de facto* embassy in Taipei simultaneously, without provoking Beijing.

Japan also exempted Taiwanese from obtaining visas for visits of 90 days or less in September 2005. During the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, Taiwan donated an enormous amount, equivalent to US\$230 million, to Japan (Swanström & Lea, 2020), and Japan responded with a 'Thank You Taiwan' movement that echoed throughout Japan, strengthening the relationship between the two. In 2011, the two countries signed an open skies agreement to liberalise bilateral commercial aviation and increase tourism, and in April 2013, Taipei and Tokyo signed a fishing treaty (*ibid*). The relationship between Taiwan and Japan improved further during the leadership of Shinzo Abe and Tsai Ing-wen, who signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) in 2017 that allowed both navies to approach and operate near the Okinotorishima atoll, as well as an agreement on maritime co-operation (*ibid*).

However, as Taiwan's government pushes for broader recognition as a legitimate government, Japan may face undue pressure to maintain the status quo in trade relations with China, which could anger Beijing. At the same time, Japan does not strain the economic relations with Taiwan. Hence, Japan is treading on a tightrope, needing to maintain a delicate balance between economic and political ties with both entities. The COVID-19 pandemic has further soured relations between China and Taiwan, who accuse each other of spreading fake news. Yet, Taiwan-Japan relations have improved, not least due to Japanese and US backing for Taiwan's entry into the WHO, which is currently blocked by Beijing (Swanström & Lea, 2020).

Scholars like Shattuck (2020) had recommended a possible dialogue, such as the Pacific Islands Dialogue, which was initiated in 2019 as the first-ever dialogue by expanding beyond a one-day event and could boost commitments from Taiwan's diplomatic partners. Besides, pursuing a free trade agreement with Taiwan, as the TAIPEI Act⁶ calls for, and sending strong signals of US support for Taiwan are expected to reduce diplomatic defections.

Similarly, Taiwan and South Korea's political relations appear strained at the moment, particularly in the aftermath of the 1992 diplomatic break, when South Korea treated Taiwan as part of China, over the online registration form for arriving visitors/tourists from Taiwan to South Korea. Taiwan has protested that it is unfriendly, which has aroused anti-Korean sentiment among Taiwanese residents (Sun-young, 2018). Since this incident, South Korea has not recognised Taiwan as a separate state. Presently, they maintain only unofficial relations through representative offices rather than embassies. Nevertheless, both South Korea and Taiwan are within each other's radar in terms of trade and international policies. Taiwan announced an international policy, known as the Southbound Policy (NSP), in 2016, focusing on elevating Taiwan's economic and political significance among 18 countries, including ASEAN members (Kumar, 2020). Taiwan's NSP was rolled out, specifically focused on e-commerce, including cross-border e-commerce partnerships within the NSP countries, which include South Korea.

Likewise, South Korea also announced a policy known as New Southern Policy (NSP) in 2017, which is focused on elevating relationships with the ASEAN countries plus India, which could also include Taiwan within the ambit of the NSP, as Taiwan is well within the region and a technological partner in the field of manufacturing of semiconductors. Moreover, though

⁶ In September 2018, Senator Cory Gardner introduced the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act. It was reintroduced in 2019 (Shattuck, 2020).

Taiwan is yet to be officially accepted as a sovereign state, it already enjoys quasi-state status, having its own economic relevance in the world.

To further the NSP policy, Taiwan has also introduced the New Economic Immigration Act, which aims to ease restrictions on foreign workers entering Taiwan, including technical experts from South Korea. Moreover, Taiwan's readiness to open its labour market to South Korea could eventually improve ties between the countries and make Taiwan a hub for technological experts. However, despite the bright vision, Taiwan could face challenges while pursuing its ambitious NSP, securing material support to invest in some of the China-allied countries among the 18+ ASEAN countries. Therefore, all allied countries should not see each other as competitors but rather as partners. Suspicion is growing between Japan, South Korea and its allies, but there should be transparency.

Possible Scenarios on Taiwan's Future

Based on the above discussions, the paper outlines three possible scenarios for the next few decades.

Scenario one: Taiwan is convinced that its roots lie in China. This acceptance has to be there among Taiwanese people, thereby leading to a peaceful reunification. Get this with China's support, without threatening them into annexing. If the situation develops, a national opinion survey of Taiwan should be conducted. A national opinion survey should include questions like, 'Do you want to remain with the status quo?' Then China have the possibility to stop the threat of force annexation.

Scenario two: There seems to be pro-China sentiment within Taiwanese, and if the KMT comes to power tomorrow, China could adopt and encourage a rolling alliance by pampering them, thus securing key policy-making support from China, although this would go against Taipei's will. Then China will stop threatening Taiwan.

Scenario three: wild card scenario, if China is not able to create scenarios 1 and 2, and China is ready to forcefully annex and will eventually develop into a full-fledged war.

Conclusion

Among the three scenarios, the most dignified and acceptable could be the first. The second scenario would amount to interfering with some other nation. The third wild card scenario is the most dangerous, in which all possible state holders engage in diplomacy to avoid it. Thus, the best possibility is to maintain peace and avoid war. It has to tackle the issue rationally and carefully before it leads to a full-fledged war. A military solution is costly and dangerous.

Going by the trend, there is also uncertainty on the Taiwan side, as China is its largest trading partner and a home to over a million Taiwanese. It may be difficult for Taiwan to deal with China on its own. Regardless of the situation, there is an imbalance in military power between China and Taiwan. There are other dilemmas for Taiwan in balancing its delicate relationships with the US and China, as it is sandwiched between the two largest, competing, and rapidly growing economies and military capabilities. Therefore, any belligerent military threats should be deterred with great care and effectively. Taiwan has its crucial role to play in this dynamism. Taiwan also needs to form alliances with the other two US allies in Northeast Asia, namely Japan and South Korea, as well as with other democratic countries in the Indo-Pacific region, such as India and Australia, among others. The Taiwan Strait has maintained peace for seven decades, but a more aggressive stance from China is emerging, which could jeopardise the region; therefore, long-lasting peace without conflict is an ideal strategy.

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