

Bumpy Sino-Taiwanese relations

NOT SINCE 1958, WHEN THE US Seventh Fleet intervened to prevent China from taking over the islands of Kinmen and Matsu, located off Fujian province, have relations between China and Taiwan been so dangerously close to war. This may not be obvious to the region or the world at large because it is taken for granted that China will not attack Taiwan except if the latter explicitly and blatantly declares its independence.

This assumption is based on the importance China places on her modernisation and development programmes. A military conflict would cause long-term damage to her. In addition, Taiwan's huge investment in China and the intense people-to-people relations make the Taiwan economy highly dependent on China. This is to China's long-term advantage.

However, this is a dependency that Chen Sui Bian is loath to permit. What Chen is trying to achieve is a step-by-step 'salami'-style independence achieved through 'democratic' means. That will be achieved either through a constitutional amendment produced by the Constituent Assembly or directly by the people through a referendum.

To be able to avail of one of these two ways, he hopes to get a majority in the December 2004 parliamentary elections through which he can legislate for a referendum in 2006. He also hopes to gain a majority in the mid-2005 elections for the Constituent Assembly through which he could amend the constitution at will. He believes that if everything proceeds democratically, the US will be unable to oppose it.

In addition, he believes that China is a 'toothless tiger' that is not going to attack Taiwan because of the realisation that the US will defend Taiwan. Therefore, he is preparing seriously for a referendum in 2006, and to have a new constitution in place in 2008.

Chen is very confident that he can get away with this strategy, especially after he has committed the country to buying \$18 billion worth of advanced weaponry over the next five years, and agreed on joint training and exercises with US troops, including as regards control and command so as to ensure the inter-operability of US and Taiwanese forces.

These developments in Taiwan and Chen's strategy are anathema to China. China consistently rejects every move that is seen as another step towards independence. Chinese leaders are struggling to maintain the status quo as much as possible.

They understand that Deng Xiaoping's paradigm of one country and two systems is no longer possible. They have urged the acceptance of one-China in the future consisting of both sides of the Straits as a precondition for talks and negotiations, direct contact and relations, as well as CBM (confidence-building measures) at the military level.

This has been rejected by Chen, who is also unwilling to promise not to declare independence even if China does not use military force against Taiwan.

For China's fourth generation leadership, which has just come

VIEW

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to power, there is no possibility of compromise on Taiwan's independence efforts, be they blatant or step-by-step. They are going to be rejected by the Chinese people if they lose Taiwan.

That is why they are prepared to accept a setback in their modernisation and development programme of one decade or more if in the end an armed resolution is necessary to prevent Taiwan's independence. And if due to this they cannot prevent a conflict with the US, they appear willing to take the necessary risk. This assessment is neither excessive nor overblown.

The danger is real. The most worrying factor is the lack of direct contact between the two parties at the official level, not even informally or at the lower levels. That is why the East Asia

region and the world have to be concerned about this potentially dangerous, complex and emotional divide across the Straits.

ASEAN, and the ASEAN-plus-3, should give political support for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. It is important that the region reiterates its support for China's One-China Policy, which all have recognised and accepted.

They could do this through diplomatic statements of support as has been done by ASEAN's foreign ministers in Qingdao on June 21, or through personal contacts with Taiwanese figures that have a role and influence in Taiwan. To be able to do that effectively, Taiwanese scholars and academics, as well as business and civil society leaders, have to be given some space and flexibility by China to meet with their East Asian counterparts.

ASEAN and ASEAN-plus-3 could help and assist in ensuring a peaceful resolution to the conflict that otherwise will engulf the whole region and mean a dramatic setback to East Asia's achievements and its future development. But China also has to regularly provide information on and, to a certain extent, discuss developments across the Strait and her policies toward them. With such strong support for the One-China Policy, Chen's moves internally would have a very limited impact regionally.

The US should pay greater attention to this potential conflict because she could be dragged into it. Her prevailing policy of 'strategic ambiguity' in preventing both sides from stepping over the red line might become irrelevant.

A more pro-active US, nudging both sides toward contacts, talks and negotiation, might be more appropriate in the near future. And since the US, as the only superpower and arbiter in the East Asian region, has a special position and involvement in the conflict, she could certainly do more to maintain peace and stability in the region.

The writer is a co-founder and member of the Board of Trustees of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). This article appeared in YaleGlobal Online (), a publication of the Yale Center for the Study of Globalization, and is reprinted by permission. Copyright (c) 2003 Yale Center for the Study of Globalization