

Calm or Dangerous? The Taiwan Strait

By Helmut Hetzel and Marijke Hetzel



Photo by Andrea Ege.

HELMUT HETZEL is a Foreign Correspondent based in The Hague. He reports to media—TV, Radio, and Newspapers—in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, The Netherlands, and Luxembourg. He was a correspondent in Beijing and visits China, Taiwan, and other Asian countries regularly.

MARIJKE HETZEL, daughter of Helmut, studies Trade Management in Asia and Mandarin at the University of Applied Sciences in Amsterdam. She

just returned from Beijing, where she took a summer course at the Beijing Normal University and received her Diploma in Mandarin. She also visits Taiwan regularly.

Relations between Taiwan (Republic of China-ROC) and China (People's Republic of China-PRC) are dynamic, and Taiwan-US relations in the Asia Pacific are of vital interest for the US.

*When two tigers are fighting in a valley,
it is good to watch them from the top of a hill.*

This Chinese saying reflects at this moment the situation with Taiwan (ROC) and the People's Republic of China (PRC), as the PRC and Japan continue a tough diplomatic struggle about the uninhabited Diaoyu Islands (Japanese name, Sentaku Islands, Taiwanese name, Diàoyútái Islands). The Diaoyu Islands are controlled by Japan in the East China Sea, located east of Mainland China, northeast of Taiwan, west of Okinawa, and north of the Ryukyus.

The Chinese tiger-fight proverb reflects only part of the complex reality in the Taiwan Strait, the East and South China Sea, and the Pacific Ocean. The ROC is in fact fully involved in the conflict between China and Japan about Diaoyu/Senkaku because, according to Taiwan, the ROC legally owns these five uninhabited islands. Japan took over the islands during the first Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), and in 1945, the US assumed administrative control at the conclusion of World War II. According to Taiwan, the US transferred the “administrative rights” to Japan in 1971 but not sovereign control of the islands. Both China and Taiwan claim that the islands have belonged to China since the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), and both the PRC and the ROC claim to be China. Thus, Taipei, as is the case with Beijing and Tokyo, is involved in the dispute.

The Diaoyu/Sentakou conflict, along with conflicting claimants for ownership of the Spratly Islands—including China, Việt Nam, Taiwan, Malaysia, Brunei, and the Philippines—has the potential to destabilize both Southeast and Northeast Asia and worsen the current relatively relaxed PRC-ROC relations. Potentially even worse, the US could get involved in this ongoing struggle regarding who has sovereignty over these two island groups. The stakes are high and include oil and gas resources, important sea-trade routes, rich fishing resources, and geopolitical dominance of this part of the world and the larger Pacific.

The US cannot completely stay out of these two disputes. The region, especially Taiwan, is of vital interest for the US, and the US-Taiwan

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Relations Act obligates the US to provide Taiwan with defensive weapons, if not intervene militarily at the very least, should Beijing attack the ROC. At present this is not likely because Taipei and Beijing are on speaking terms again since the KMT (Kuomintang), the Chinese Nationalist Party, regained power in 2008, and KMT President Ma Ying-jeou was re-elected in 2012. President Ma is actively seeking to improve ROC-PRC relations, mainly by staying with the status quo, thus preserving the excellent relations the two governments currently enjoy. Bilateral trade and economic relations are booming, and Taiwan has invested about US \$250 billion in China. Millions of tourists from the PRC visit Taiwan and vice versa, with hundreds of flights per week between the two countries, including flights from Taipei to various destinations in the PRC. Regular talks between Beijing and Taipei on a variety of issues are also ongoing.

Nevertheless, Beijing asserts that Taiwan is part of China, although there is no legal basis for China's claim, in our opinion. The People's Republic of China was founded on October 1, 1949, while the ROC dates its founding on the mainland to the October 1911 revolution and the official declaration of the Republic of China in early 1912, so Taipei has an older case it is the legal government of China. The PRC's so-called “One-China Policy” includes the positioning of approximately 1,000 missiles pointed directly at Taiwan.

From a geopolitical point of view, it is in the vital interest of the US to guarantee the Taiwan Relations Act and support its allies and friends like Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines if the US wants to continue control of the Pacific. As an emerging superpower, the PRC seems to have this ambition too.

The presence of the US in the Asia-Pacific region and the efforts it has made in the region are important, as they help shape a geopolitical climate and make the US immediately available to respond to its needs

said Wallace Gregson, who served as US assistant secretary of defense for Asia and Pacific security affairs in an international forum in Taipei, hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies on April 18, 2012.¹ He added:

The US and the world need China to be a successful contributor to the international system, but at the same time the US needs to work with our allies and friends and be there to support their interests.

Currently, in an effort to contain the PRC, the US has established a “cordon sanitaire” around the Pacific coasts of China from Japan via Taiwan to the Philippines. The PRC intends to break through this US barrier eventually by possibly gaining control of Taiwan and most of the other islands in the China Sea.

Should Taiwan stick to the status quo and rely on and trust the US? In the long run, Taiwan could seek real independence with the support of the US if the geopolitical situation and political climate offer that opportunity. Do not forget that by the time readers receive this issue, the leadership of the PRC will have recently changed with the autumn 2012 critical meetings of the National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, which has the potential to change PRC policy toward the ROC. In the Taiwan Strait and the Asia Pacific region, there is more at stake than control of a big part of the Pacific and acquisition of resources like oil and gas. Democracy and freedom are also at stake because Taiwan is a free country, and the PRC retains a one-party authoritarian system.

Taiwan and China are both Chinese, but they have developed differently, and as of 2012, they have significantly contrasting societies. It is in the interest of the US to guarantee and to defend a free and democratic Tai-

wan—for political and geopolitical reasons. It is a very tricky situation, and despite present calm, the new negative relations between Taiwan and the PRC could easily develop. The new tensions arising now in the Taiwan Strait and the China Sea do not only affect Taiwan and China but also Japan, Việt Nam, the Philippines, other Asian countries, and the US as an ally of Japan and Taiwan. President Obama and his administration face another huge challenge in the Asia Pacific region. ■

NOTE

1. Shih Hsiu-chuan, *Taipei Times*, April 19, 2012, quote from Wallace Gregson, April 18, 2012, “US Strategy in Asia and Taiwan’s Future” forum hosted by Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), accessed October 4, 2012, <http://bit.ly/UholkJ>.

China, Don’t Be Stupid

By Andrej Matišák



ANDREJ MATIŠÁK is Deputy Head of the Foreign Desk for the Slovakian newspaper, *Pravda*. He has conducted face-to-face interviews with such notables as Shirin Ebadi, Kim Campbell, Vaclav Havel, Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, Hashim Thaci, and James Woolsey. He has reported from Kosovo, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the US (Slovak presidency of UN Security Council, February 2007), Taiwan (presidential election, March 2008), and Moldova (parliamentary election, July 2009).

An anonymous diplomat from Taiwan said: *Personally, I think we Taiwanese should not depend on this kind of wishful thinking that America will help us. We should get prepared and more globalized, so that it is such an important link in the world that China will think twice before taking any stupid actions.* (May 2012)

This anonymous diplomat was referring to the possibility that China will attack his country when I asked him whether, in his opinion, the US would react militarily. Currently, any attack on Taiwan seems unlikely, but an analysis of a potential conflict is another matter. The future direction of Beijing is largely a crystal ball prediction.

The world is, of course, somewhat obsessed with the People’s Republic of China (PRC). After the fall of the Iron Curtain and Francis Fukuyama’s 1992 book *The End of History and the Last Man*, many had anticipated that the world had entered a time of perpetual victories for liberal democracy. The West won the Cold War, but Beijing found some good reasons to celebrate. The PRC was offering cheap labor and was able to win access to global markets. Furthermore, economic development in mainland China elevated millions of people out of poverty, regardless of the ideology of Chinese rulers.

The PRC’s success made many of us think that perhaps this strange mixture of Communist-Capitalist ideas is the actual end of history, or at least one of its possible ends. The West faces economic problems. The concept of *laissez-faire* is not a solution anymore. Is the Chinese iron fist the solution? Globally, the speeches of many politicians are full of words about

new rules and regulations. Of course, it is probably impossible to deny that we need to put some restrictions on financial markets and banks.

How far can we go with our Chinese obsession? In 2010, *Forbes Magazine* included an article that asserted that President Hu Jiantao was the most powerful person in the world.¹ Why? It was suggested that Hu did not need to follow democratic rules. Unlike Western counterparts, Hu could divert rivers, build cities, jail dissidents, and censor the Internet without meddling from bureaucrats or courts.

Forbes Magazine’s article notwithstanding, neither Hu Jintao nor any other Chinese leader has absolute power. The Chinese leadership is more of a collective one, with party elites holding various views. But, depending upon circumstances, PRC leaders might very well think that starting a war with Taiwan could be a good idea.

War was a part of the rise of every great power in history. Why would Beijing like to start a war with Taipei? Perhaps just to confirm its superpower status. The war might not be a necessity for the PRC, but a situation might occur where Beijing would like to exert its power in Northeast Asia. Of course, such an approach would mean a condemnation from the international community, but it is not completely beyond imagination that the PRC would actually be in a position where the regime would be able to afford a war.

There is also at least a second scenario where Beijing may think about starting a conflict. The PRC might use a war against Taiwan to divert attention from rising domestic unrest. In authoritarian regimes, the arrival of new rulers to power is often accompanied by visible uncertainty. Even such a little thing as the September 2012 short public disappearances of now President Xi Jinping quickly become a problem as the speculation about Xi flooded the Internet faster than any Chinese bullet train. But it is really nothing new. Every authoritarian regime has instability deep in its DNA and is, in fact, quite fragile.

What would the world do if the PRC invaded Taiwan? Or perhaps more germane to many readers of this journal, what would or should the US do? Washington versus Beijing would be a huge quarrel between two nuclear powers connected via vast business interests. With the possible exception of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis—if historical events are indicators—the US never directly confronted the nuclear Soviet Union. Certainly, this was not the case in the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. This attempt of Hungarians to get rid of rulers from Moscow was brutally crushed by the Soviet Army. History repeated itself a little over a decade later when the Warsaw Pact invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968.